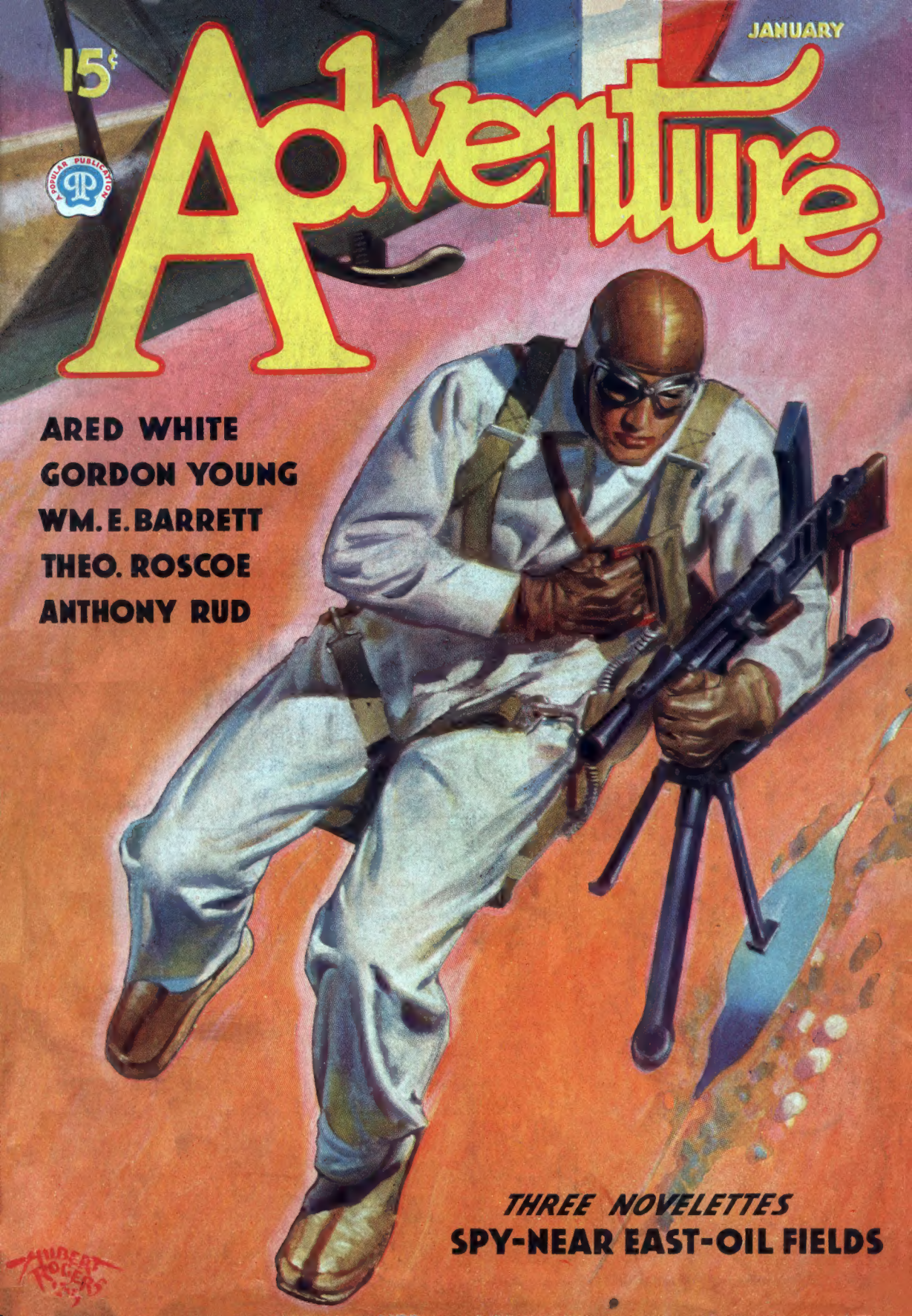
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ANTHONY RUD
THREE NOVELETTES
SPY-NEAR EAST-OIL FIELDS
HERBERT ROGERS

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SURE — IF YOU LIKE. I THOUGHT YOU'D BE STEPPING OUT WITH SUE, THOUGH!

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On Account of a Woman

THE ship, Cairo-bound, was steaming out of the Red Sea into the Gulf of Suez, and a sunset with more glory than all the battle flags of the world had transmuted an eastern shoreline to a coast of solid gold.

Farraday, the foremost animal collector in the business, had been moody, almost nervous throughout the afternoon. Ordinarily occupied with his specimen cages on the foredeck, he had paced in offish solitude behind the steering-engine house, gravity in his weathered, angular face, eyes brooding on the passing shore. And at dinner, that night when the naturalist started his first spoonful of consommé, then flung napkin to lips, pushed back from the table and stalked from the saloon as if ill, his traveling companion, Mendel the metallurgist, was worried.

"What was the matter?" he wanted to know, coming abreast with the naturalist, who was hurrying aft. "You looked, when you started your soup, as if you'd been poisoned."

A novelette by THEODORE ROSCOE

"I have." Farraday touched his forehead with a handkerchief. "That chef must have gone insane. That stuff tasted deadly to me. Deadly as—as sin."

Mendel suggested summoning the captain, but the naturalist shook his head.

"Not that way," he demurred. "That isn't what I mean."

When they stood by the jackstaff where the frigate birds wheeled, the metallurgist voiced some exasperation.

"Look here, Farraday, what's been eating you? All afternoon you've gloomed around by yourself, watching that Sinai coastline as cryptic as an Egyptian cat, and now a spoonful of soup sets you off as if a ghost had seen you. If there's anything I can do—"

"You started it," the naturalist said somberly. "Remember when our ship came in sight of Sinai? I said we must be passing over the spot where Moses led the Children of Israel across the Red Sea. The place where the waves rolled back to let the Chosen People cross dry-shod and escape the armies of Pharoah. You said you didn't believe in those Bible stories."

"I said I didn't believe in miracles," the metallurgist snapped. "Moses might have led his crowd across the Red Sea at some shallow spot that has since been dredged out by the Suez Canal engineers. Perhaps some conjunction of wind and tide drove the waters back. But there wasn't any so-called miracle.

And I expressed surprise at you, a scientist, talking as if you believed there was. And what's this to do with a dish of soup?"

Farraday's eyes were focused on the tenuous gold thread that was land in the east; his voice came curiously solemnized from his lean and hardened jaws. "Coincidence, that's all. You disputing the miracles, then that soup. Miracles? There's the land they came from, that Near East littoral out there. As for Moses and his Children—I knew one of those Israelites. A woman with all the mystery of midnight and the wonder of day, a face and figure of pure magic, an allure and bafflement that could turn men into fanatics and set two friends clawing at each other like murderers."

The naturalist scrubbed his lips with his handkerchief as if to scour them of the memory; and the metallurgist, who had known him as a confirmed bachelor, regarded Farraday in mounting astonishment.

"Go inland," the naturalist pointed, "through those hills beyond Sinai and you'll come to the Gulf of Akaba. Arabia lies across the Gulf, and just north of the Arabian border you'll come to a place I don't like to think about. That's where I met this woman. I didn't believe in miracles, myself, in those days. Neither did a friend of mine who was with me when I met her. She had the sort of face that wouldn't believe in miracles, either. Bold. Hard. Wait till I tell you how hard. My friend pronounced her a woman who would take a dare, just the precious type of woman he wanted. He wanted her and I wanted her, and we almost murdered each other in cold blood to get her. Only a miracle saved us. Do you want to know what kind of poison was in my soup, tonight? Do you want to hear about this wonderful woman and the miracle that happened?"

Fixed on that flaming eastern shoreline, Farraday's eyes were dark with a light not reflected from the Red Sea sundown.

The metallurgist said he wanted to know.

The metallurgist was hungry when his friend began the story, but when it was finished he had lost his appetite.

TWO years after the War (Farraday began) the natural history society I was working with decided to send me into the Arabian desert after specimens—a rare type of basilisk lizard, to be exact—and I was to go in from the Gulf of Akaba, work across the north end of Arabia and swing back south to the coast of the Red Sea. Egypt, Palestine and Arabia all meet at the Gulf up there, but they don't shake hands.

It's a foul neck of the woods at best, and two years after the World War wasn't best. Allenby's army had been around there, so had Lawrence. You'll recall the British made a lot of promises to the Arabs that London didn't keep, and some of the tribes didn't care if the War was over or not. If I wanted to get out of there with lizard skins—not to mention my own—I'd have to walk on eggs. My employers instructed me to sing low when I met any Arabs; then they sent me Rallston as my assistant collector!

It was a ticklish enough assignment without the extra hazard of this Johnny Rallston. A naturalist runs across some pretty wild specimens in his work, but Rallston was just about the wildest young mammal I'd been associated with. Indigenous to Australia, he hailed from Brisbane, and when I say "hail" I mean he came shouting, jaw out, fists cocked, ready to go.

His father was a revivalist clergyman of the old hell's fire and damnation school, and the boy had been reared in a parsonage on prunes and proverbs—and a horsewhip, too, I fancy—by the sort of maiden aunts who still wore bus-

tles on the back of their minds. Then the war had let him out of his cage and he'd started off to see the world with Allenby. He'd been everything from air pilot to cameleer, and after the Armistice he'd bummed around the Near East on all manner of crazy jobs, finally landing a position with my outfit.

I'll never forget my first view of Rallston. He'd been with the Society about a month, and he came slamming into our Cairo office as if he owned the affair. He wore a British officer's cap, insignia removed, set challengingly forward on a thatch of bleached hair; a cowboy's grin in a face as ruddy as a cherub's; impudence in green-blue eyes; a pair of whipcord riding breeches that had lost their whip and most of the cord. Over his shoulder he carried an expensive photographer's kit — "borrowed" from the department of signals—and his feet were bare.

"Sold the field boots," he told me with a grin. "Thomas of London and worth most a ticket anywhere. Sold 'em to buy this naval officer's wife a bit of jade. All I wanted was one dance because she was beautiful. She took the jade; then she wouldn't dance with me 'cause I'm barefoot."

"Sold your boots to buy a trinket?" I gaped at Rallston. "I thought you were working to save money and go back to Australia."

"Go home?" he laughed. "Not me! Not back to that parsonage. You never knew my old man. Believes every word of the Bible, that sort of thing. Say, he almost had me studying for the ministry."

"And why didn't you?"

"I couldn't believe," he told me, "in miracles."

We came to be fast friends the following months in Cairo, and I thought I knew Rallston pretty well. I was fifteen years younger, myself, in those days, and we got in some wild scrapes together around the town. I didn't know what was the matter with him, but I thought I could guess. Typical minister's son breaking loose from too much early repression. Out to paint the town red. His hatred of that home parsonage and all it represented amounted to a phobia. He read all the sophisticated agnostic literature he could lay his hands on, and called himself an atheist.

"I've chucked all that religion stuff," he liked to say. "Old-fashioned bunk, that's all it is. I've got a new ideal."

Apparently this new ideal had nothing to do with keeping solvent or sober, but he did his work well enough and the Society kept him on. He had a likely fist, and he knew the Arab lingo. That's why they sent him on the Arabian lizard-hunting expedition to be my assistant.

Now you may think yourself acquainted with a chap around the city, but you never know a man until you're off with him in some isolated spot like that jumping-off Gulf of Akaba place, north end of the Red Sea. That's where I first came to know the real matter with my Australian assistant collector. That's where I learned about his "new ideal". Rallston was a collector, all right, but not of lizards. I collected lizards. Rallston collected women!

Women, women, women! That boy had gone girl-crazy. Let a British pleasure yacht come steaming up the coast and there was Rallston swimming out to the ship—quite literally—with a rose in his teeth. Let a caravan come grunting and snuffling over the sand dunes, and Rallston was down in the oasis to meet it, like as not fighting three beachcombers for the hand of some desert belle before the camels had time to kneel. I thought when we got clear of the seaport that marked our base of supplies, and started into the desert, he'd get over it, but the desert was worse.

Do you know why he lugged that photographer's outfit with him? To take

pictures of beautiful women, that was why. To photograph the lovely ladies he always thought he was meeting. His tunic pockets were stuffed with snapshots. Egyptian dancing girls in seven veils. Moslem debutantes with one eye wistful behind bars. Circassian "princesses" in fantastic costumes from heaven knew where.

Officers' wives. Russian refugees. All the backwash the War had left stranded on the Near East beach and rarer specimens from the direction of Mecca. Daytimes I'd be off bottling basilisks, Rallston would be camera-hunting ladies off in oasis palms. Nights he'd lie sprawled on the sand, sorting through his precious photographs and sighing like a crack-brained Romeo.

Like a lot of sophisticated young men who went through the war and came out thinking they were tough, this Australian hellion was as sloppily romantic inside as a bouquet of sweet peas. Having coughed up an overdose of religion, he had proceeded to swallow in its stead—on an empty stomach—such a mess of romanticism as would have sickened St. Valentine.

"Tagging around after every skirt you see," I gibed him one night. "You're too smart to believe the Old Testament, but fall for every female who gives you the eye. Keep up this game, and you'll go home sooner than you think. In a box."

For the first time Rallston's eyes were sober. "I won't go home in a box or any way. Not till I've found that ideal."

"And what's this wonderful ideal?" I had to jeer.

"None of 'em have come up to it so far," he admitted seriously, "but I'm going to find a woman, my lad, that's something a bit different from the Alice-sit-by-the-fires you've got back in civilization. No more clinging vines for me. I don't want citified swank and lipstick, either. I want a woman with spirit, a woman"—he swept his arm in a Shakesperean gesture—"who isn't all tied up with corsets and rules of conduct and religion. She's got to be gorgeous looking and all, but she's got to be something more. That's why I like the girls in this country around here. No knitting and rocking chairs and chaperoned tea-parties in this neck of the woods. They have to fight their way to get around. They won't take no for an answer. That's what I want, old man. The sort of women the only thing she *will* take is dare. Righto! A woman who could give or take a dare."

So that was the ideal my assistant collector had substituted for his old-time religion. That was the reason for his battling from one bar-room to the next and his midnight excursions where angels feared to tread. I saw what he meant, all right. Clumsily phrased, but the mental picture he conveyed was a back-to-nature dream girl riding a white horse across windswept horizons, beautiful as Godiva, spritely as Eve and bold as Ninon de Lenclos with a whip.

And of course he was looking through just the region where you'd never find such a girl. Wind-swept, starry-eyed and nature-free as an Arab's daughter may look as she rides across the dunes, your desert maiden is most hide-bound and rule-booked of all the breed. Allah to her is a great big thundercloud waiting to pounce; Life is one long inhibition and next to that she's scared of her henna-whiskered menfolk. And the next biggest sin in a Moslem maiden's category is to let some white unbeliever snap her photograph.

I told you there was trouble enough to begin with, and now you've got the set-up on my assistant collector, Rallston. I scarcely have to tell you how the storm broke. Lord knows, I'd warned him. But advising your fellow man about women—especially if you've knocked around together and happen to be nearly of an age—is something you can't do. I was fool enough, myself,

on that score, and nobody to preach. You'll see I didn't hold any monopoly on the brains.

I WAS bottling basilisks in my tent on the sands one evening when Rallston came walloping over the horizon as if the devil were after him. Dust trailed like the smoke from an express train behind his racing camel, and not one devil, but twenty were after him. Twenty Arab horsemen bunched together, cloaks bannering, yells yapping from their beards and bullets snapping from their guns.

"Run!" Rallston shouted at me. "Run! They'll kill you!"

I had just about time to saddle my *mehari*, and that was all. Water casks, rifles, rations, baggage, collector's equipment, everything had to be left behind. It was touch and go with those desert nomads shooting the callouses off my camel's heels; our only chance lay in outdistancing those ponies to the Red Sea coast and we were a good many miles up the north end of Arabia from the Red Sea.

Darkness swept down out of Asia and the desert was blotted by India ink. There wasn't a star in that blackness, or a moon. I think there was an upper layer of sand blowing overhead, and the firmament was blanked out. A wonderful situation when your compass was miles behind.

By midnight we were lost, and by sunrise we might have gone over the edge Columbus' sailors were afraid of, deep in a wilderness of canyons and barren mountain ranges ablaze in the sun like hills of scrap iron. The Red Sea was nowhere in sight, but our pursuers were. They kept right on chasing us, deeper and deeper into those burning hills of rock, and they never gave up until late afternoon.

Rallston and I pulled our doddering camels into the shadow of a big yellow boulder, and watched our enemy go. They fired a few discharges into the air as a final warning, turned their horses and rode back over a ridge, vanishing in the dust-haze toward Arabia. Rallston lounged against the rock and watched the departure with a rueful grin.

"By Jove, that was a shave! Imagine them going off the deep end like that, just because I was taking this Arab girl's picture." He patted the camera-box slung at his side, and the corners of his mouth went down. "She wasn't worth it, though. Just like all the rest. Didn't care when I held her hand, but screamed when I snapped the camera. That brought her old man and all those devils down on me like a pack of mad dogs—"

I wanted to come down on him like a pack of mad dogs, myself. All night and all morning of that crazy race I'd been too mad to speak. Now when I blew up my tongue was so swollen with thirst I could only stand croaking and waving a fist at the sky.

"You've done it this time, you crack-brained fool! You realise we're lost? Lost! My Mauser rifles, my Zeiss binoculars, maps, five hundred dollars worth of collector's equipment, eight weeks work picking up specimens—"

"Honest, buddy, when I get the money I'll pay you back."

"Eight weeks work, specimens, probably my job, everything—" I shook my fist at the horizon where the Arabs had vanished—"everything lost back there in those sand dunes, just because you wouldn't keep your girl-crazy hands off the first female who smiled at—"

"She wasn't smiling," he corrected me, "she was crying. Standing in that oasis with her hands over her face. I thought she was swell when I first saw her. She was wearing these little ankle bells—"

"Ankle bells!" I panted. "I don't care if she was wearing the bells of Saint

Mary's. Get it through your head that we've run off the map and we haven't any water! Not a drop! Only a miracle got us out of that," I raged; then I flung an arm at the landscape around us. "It'll take another miracle to get us out of this!"

"Bah!" Rallston snapped. "You know I don't believe in such rot. I'd hate to depend on Bible magic to get out of anything. I got you into this, and I'll get you out of it."

He was a cool one, all right, and scanning the gray cliffs around us, I would not have expected divine intervention, myself. There are some places on the globe where faith can waver, and that was one of them. Now that I had a chance to look at where we were, I wasn't sure we were on the globe. You've seen pictures of Death Valley. Well, this was Death Valley doubled. Even the air was dead. Heat rained down through a silence as quiet as deafness, and the rocks lay around on shelves of pumice and limestone like white bones.

There wasn't a breath of air or a jackal as far as the eye could see. Great fissures had cracked the floor of the valley we were in, and the canyon walls sheared up as silent and bare as deserted skyscrapers. Ashes. That's what the landscape made me think of. Dead ashes. Westward where the sun was lowering, as if in a hurry to withdraw its blood-stained eye from this scene of desolation, a range of cliffs stood up jagged as the roofline of a shelled town. I tell you, there wasn't a single sign of life.

I'd never seen a place like that on the Arabian map. Maybe we'd ended up among the craters on the other side of the moon. It was a hell of a country. I could smell the sulphur.

"All because of this damned dream girl of yours," I sneered at Rallston. "Well, what are you going to do about it? The camels had a good feed yesterday afternoon and they can keep going. But we'll be dead and cured as figs by tomorrow afternoon if we don't find water."

He pointed west up the valley.

"The Red Sea ought to be over there. I'll ride that way, and you take it east. We'll meet back at this big rock at sunset. Okay?"

I told him I wouldn't die of grief if I never saw him again, and we set out in opposite directions looking for water. But the moment Rallston's feather-brained head was out of sight I was sorry. There was something about the burning silence of that gray landscape that got up under my skin the minute he was gone.

I started leading my camel, and my boots sent echoes up the canyon, echoes that died of loneliness away up the cliffs against the sky. A kicked pebble would go rattling across the rocks with the disturbance of a rat in a tomb, and when I sat down on a boulder to rest, the silence flowed up around me in a pressure that hurt my ears.

A couple of miles by myself in that solidified, ten-million-ton hush, and I was suffering for companionship as avidly as drink. Water was nowhere to be seen. Just calcined cliffs and emptiness. I might have been the first man along that fissured valley since the time of Exodus, and I felt pretty tiny among those skyscraper walls of stone.

The queerest sensation stole over me, something quite apart from the nervousness of fatigue or fright. A feeling of evil cloaking this burned-out landscape. A sort of a repugnance mixed with fear, if you can imagine the feeling. The sort of shudder you might experience on passing a leper island far at sea. or standing before an empty house with the blinds drawn on an evil street. There was something about that scorching emptiness of stone that was bad.

The oddest panic came over me. I wanted to run. I wanted to make a lot

of noise and get out of there. I could see why those outraged desert tribesmen hadn't followed us in these hills. I could have throttled Rallston for losing me in this landscape, but I give you my word, when sunset started slanting ochred shadows across the rocks, I mounted and rode back to our rendezvous as if the legions of Eblis were on my track.

Just as I reached the big yellow boulder, there was Rallston riding out of the west the same way. A second his camel was silhouetted atop that ragged ridge with red sky between its legs; then he came on the gallop, riding the hump like a jockey, hair wild, camera flying on its strap, larruping along the valley bottom as if to outstrip the long gray shadows that were reaching like giant fingers after him.

I was mighty glad to see him coming, that's the truth. But when I saw his face my heart contracted with fresh alarm. Plastered with white dust from boot to crown, he looked like a wild-eyed ghost scared to grinning, until he came close enough for me to see his eyes, bloodshot not with fear but excitement. Before I could muster a yell, he was off his camel with a rodeo rider's leap, bounding at me through the dust-whirl.

"I've got her!" he screamed at me. "By God, Farraday, I've got her!"

"Water!" I cried.

"The woman, you fool!" Rallston laughed and capered around me like a crazy man, holding up his precious photographer's kit. "The woman I've been looking for. Beautiful! Marvelous! Best looking woman you ever saw, and she's got more nerve in her little finger than you ever heard of. A pack of Arabs are holding her captive in a village the other side of those cliffs," he screeched at me, "and we're going back to rescue her tonight!"

Word of honor, I could have killed him there and then. Shot him down in cold blood. That crack-potted, romance-crazy Romeo! Send him after water in this thirst-smothered wilderness and have him come back blabbing out a love story. I don't know what did stop me from killing him, except that you just can't kill fellows of Rallston's kidney. He had that hell-for-leather, sword-and-cloak, cow-jump-over-the-moon quality which charmed the lives of Casanova and Cellini and all those scapegrace matinee idols who balcony-climbed their way through history and got away with it.

Those velvet-panted rapscallions were salesmen, that's why. They talked their way into it and turned around and talked their way out of it. But they were tongue-tied bumpkins compared to my assistant collector Rallston selling me his latest heart-throb in that gray valley of petrified desolation, that night.

"Rallston," I snarled at him, "I'm going to knock your damned lovesick block off for this. Instead of asking for water in that village you were playing post office with some dame. Before I go over there to get a drink I'm going to break your head."

"Like hell," he countered, waving his arms. "You're going to help me save this woman, see? She's white, Farraday. A white woman!"

He knew the "white woman" angle would break down my sales resistance, and once he got his teeth in that opening, he didn't let go. He outshouted me, and I began to listen. It was all pretty queer against that Valley of Death background with Rallston's voice petering out in microscopic echoes up the cliffs. If I'd had any sense I'd have whacked that Australian on the jaw right at the start, but I've said I didn't hold any monopoly on the brains, and you'll see.

When I'd left him that afternoon, Rallston had scouted over that western rim of cliffs sniffing for water, and no sooner topped the rise than he'd found it. Unfortunately it wasn't drinking water, though. As far as Rallston could

tell, the water beyond those cliffs was the Red Sea.

"A devilish barren coast," he told me, "with a smell in the air. Alkaline. There's a yellow fog combing in from the western horizon, and all I could see was a couple of small boats way out. A shoulder of mountain stretched seaward under the cliffs; from where I was I couldn't see the other side of that headland, but it sure is a desolate spot. I hiked my camel down to the shore thinking I'd start around the headland, hoping to find a town."

Rallston's hopes were raised by finding a bumboat in a sort of rocky lagoon, a good-sized sailing barge about the build of a big launch with a forward hold for stowing freight.

"There's still oars in the row-locks and a deckboom with block and tackle unlimbered, like some one's put in to pick up cargo. But when I get near enough, I see that hull's been there a long time. Beached a couple of years. Sail gone to rag. The forward hold's empty, and so's a water cask under the rowing thwart. That dry keg and a skull lying up the beach told me what happened. Somebody'd come ashore and started afoot around land's end. Died of thirst and never been found. It's got my wind up a bit, that skull."

It got my own wind up, hearing Rallston tell about it.

"What's this deserted native bumboat and a skull got to do with your dream girl?" I wanted to know. Rallston was reciting this detail with all the wordage of a newspaper broadcast, and I yearned to hear the end of it and wring his neck.

"I'm coming to that," he panted. "I'm coming to that. I'm telling about the boat because we're going to use it for the rescue. I'm sure that Arab village doesn't know it's there. Well, I started my camel around this headland, taking the same path that skull had been following. About two miles up over the headland, there's the town on the other side."

He halted to draw maps in the dust with his boot-toe.

"The beach spreads out under cliffs too steep for an eagle, see? There's a batch of native boats along the beach, and the town's hugged against the base of the cliffs like a bunch of white blocks piled there by high tide. It's a Moslem stronghold, judging by the minarets, a hell of a tough-looking town."

Having reason to fear the Arab temper, my assistant hadn't started down hot-foot to beg for water, but had tethered his camel and climbed down through the rocks to spy. At first he thought the village deserted; then he saw the whole population, like a crowd of sheeted ghosts, massed on the beach under the headland. Right under the rock where he was crouching.

"And that's where I saw *her*!" Rallston shook me by the arms. "She was standing in the middle of that ragged, stinking swarm, the dust standing up around her like smoke. The whole crowd was hooting, yelling, hollering around her in some kind of dance, and dragging her—*dragging* her, you hear me? She was chained, Faraday! Chained by the ankles to a flat platform of planks that was hitched to a camel. That gang of Arab wolves was dragging her down the beach. You think she was crying out, fainting? She was not! She was standing upright like a soldier, Farraday. A white mantle pulled tight around her and the sort of figure—say, when I think of those brown heathens screaming at her, it makes me sick!"

In the sooty gloaming that had filled the valley about us, Rallston's eyes were glittering like a cat's. He made me see that woman and the brown mob pulling her down the beach. He walked up and down, clenching and unclenching his fists as his voice painted the picture. He dug his father's best sermon-tones out of his memory to preach me the story of that woman's figure and how the Arabs dragged her and mobbed around her.

"And she's white," Rallston shook me. "Young. Beautiful. Stood there, ankles chained to that platform, and never made a sound nor shivered a finger. Even when she saw me up there in the rocks she never made a sound. Get this! She saw me there. Looked straight at me. Her head was turned on her shoulder all the time, disdainful, and when the drag went under the rock-shelf where I was, she looked right into my face. Did she scream for help? Not her! Any other woman would have screamed and given me away. This girl stood steady as Gibraltar. Didn't move a muscle. I couldn't see her eyes for the shadow, but her face was proud as a queen's, not a sign of fear. Head to her little bare feet she was simply covered with that stinging white dust, but her chin was up, I tell you. Her mouth. Defiant. Damn near contemptuous. Of the mob and—and me, too. 'Come and get me,' she looked at me with that expression. By God! like a challenge. 'Come and get me if you're big enough. I don't think you can do it, but come and get me if you think you're big enough. I dare you!' "

Rallston's lips went white at this part of his story, and the sweat beads glittered like mercury on his knotted forehead. I could feel my own pulse getting up speed. Talk about Latins—

it takes the Anglo-Saxon to play the heroics. Already I'd forgotten my lips were splitting from thirst.

"What happened then?" I whispered. "What did they do with her then?"

"Then the whole rotten hubbub went off down the beach," Rallston cursed, "and she just kept looking back over her shoulder, chin raised, looking up at me with that expression. I couldn't help her. All I could do was lie low and watch. Watch that mob of brutes drag her to a hole in the rocks down the headland, a little cave. They left her there. Posted a dirty beggar with a big iron spear on guard, and streamed back to their filthy village. She was looking back at the last. My God, for all I know they're going to kill her. You've got to help me save her, Farraday! I'm going back and get her out of there tonight if it's the last thing I live to do!"

I said harshly:

"It'll be the last thing you'll live to do, all right. Listen, you fool. How can two of us attack an Arab village tonight or any night? Croaking for water, unarmed—"

"We'll surprise them," he blazed at me. "That cave isn't far from the water and the town's about a mile up the beach, away from the headland. We'll row around the headland in the dark. take her on the rush!"

"Take her where?" I swore. I was weakening, and it made me mad. Where could you take a woman in that desert of stones? Even the atmosphere was petrified.

Rallston swung an impatient arm.

"Take her to sea, man! To sea! There's a fog out there. We wouldn't have a chance going inland, but they'll never see us in that fog. All we've got to do is make the ship lane to Suez and we'll be picked up by midnight. Look!"

Now how do you suppose that lad ended his sale's talk? He was a devil of a boy, all right. He began to tear into his photographer's kit; dumped out his camera, rolls of film, little bottles of chemical, all the truck these vagabond photographers around fairs and boardwalks have to carry. Next thing I knew, he'd fished from an envelope, a damp, glazed picture. A photograph, on my word!

"I got her," he panted through his teeth, "just as the mob was dragging her away. Snapped the camera just at the second. Too much dust and no time to focus; then I had to stop and develop the thing in twilight up in those cliffs and only a little water from my bottle in my kit."

A little water in his kit and he'd used it for photography! But I never thought about it then. I was staring at that photograph and that photograph was staring at me. There wasn't much light left to see it by, but there was enough. Enough to see the white figure of a woman standing on a wooden drag in the midst of a hooded, dark-whiskered mob; her mantle pulled tight about her, her back to the camera, face turned on her shoulder, chin lifted above the coiling dust.

Some women can hug a woolen wrap around them and make it sheer as a veil. Only it wasn't the figure that bothered me. It was the expression on the woman's face. Rallston hadn't missed it when he called it, "Come and get me. I dare you!" But he hadn't gone far enough. All the defiance and scorn of a woman for the terrors of a man's world were in that expression.

Maybe she was in trouble, but she'd ask nobody's advice. There was independence in that chin, neither fear nor humility. It was a beautiful face, wilfully beautiful—the face of a lost *Peri* who defied the devils and taunted the angels to the rescue. The challenge and beauty of that face struck up out of the photograph, dim as it was, and made my senses swim.

"Maybe they're going to kill her," Rallston hoarsed out. "Or they're holding her for ransom! Are you going to

leave her chained in that cave for the hands of those brutes?"

"Rallston," I cried, "what are we waiting for?"

Did you think there was a woman so wonderfully bold and beautiful just the sight of her photograph would bring you running? Well, you don't know the half of how wonderful that woman was! Rallston jumped his camel and I grabbed mine and followed him up the valley and over the western cliffs with no more thought of the danger than the proverbial fool in a place forbidden to the angels. And there weren't any angels around the coast where Rallston led me that night. There was none of the windy distance, no healthy oceanic sweep to that seascape.

A moon that looked moldy was sneaking down a low-hung sky as our camels topped the crags, and I got my first view of the sea. The beach far below was a ragged thread of lime. Rocks were mounded like slag along the shore, waste deposit left there from some long-ago reducing process, some overwhelming fire that had killed even the stones. The smell of that ancient fire was still in the night, sulphurous.

The water that had come too late had lain there too many centuries, yellowed, stagnated. Not far from the shoreline a saffron fog that might have been the smoke of that ancient, now-forgotten holocaust was banked up under the sky to blot the horizons.

Can you imagine a sea gone stale? Sweeping in with long undulant strides that came from no impulse in the earth but might have been started by the moon, the swells washed the coast with a sullen mutter that only undertoned the silence.

If I didn't like the hinterland we'd come from, I liked that coast even less. It couldn't be the Red Sea. The scrap iron cliffs, the clinker-like shore, the sea under the moon made me think of water in the firebox of a cast-off iron stove.

"Turn the camels loose here," Rallston ordered in a voice trembling with excitement. "There's the boat I told you about. Hurry."

That boat with its empty thwarts, its dried watercask, its sailcloth with the moon shining through, oars abandoned and that silent skull for a watcher up the beach, did nothing to cheer the scene. Surf creamed against the hull, booming a leaden echo through the square hatchway in the foredeck, the sound coming up from an empty cargo hold. Not unlike a small canal barge, the craft looked about as seaworthy as that Norsemen's gondola they found on the coast of Labrador.

But I couldn't back out now. My companion dredged a rusty anchor out of the shallows, and side by side on the thwart, each with an oar, we pulled our brains out to get her around the headland. Like a thieving galleon we thefted around land's end, and I was sweating like a teakettle when Rallston steered us into a hideaway between tall rocks and told me we'd reached the spot.

Spot was right. The beach there curved like a gigantic simitar flat under the moon, and when I saw the white-walled village at the far end of its tip, I held my breath.

"There's the town," Rallston whispered. He was leading me through a goat-jump trail up the rocks, stooped over, tense, stealthy as an Indian. "And" —he stopped to fasten sinewy fingers around a loose rock—"there's the cave and the guard. Now!"

As Rallston gritted, "Now!" he sprang from the shadows like a panther. I had a momentary glimpse of a dark aperture scooped out under the cliff's overhang and a figure posed on the threshold, a ragged figure leaning on a spear. *Slug!* The man's turban muffled the blow. Rallston's rock dropped like a meteor and the Arab fell. My assistant collector collected the heavy iron spear, spun, beckoned, darted into the cave. I jumped

in after him, stiffened as my boots hit over the threshold, stopped. Mr. Rallston had already stopped. Together we stood. And stared.

She was waiting in the inner darkness of that close-walled den, barefoot on her platform, her toes pointed toward the back wall, her head turned on her shoulder, face toward the door. Moonbeams poured yellow-green through the arch in the rocks and touched her curved, tense figure with gelid radiance, cold as witch-shine.

She was tall as a man, and from heels to crown in the dimness she sent off a white glow, ghostly as one summoned from the astral plane. Beneath the stiff folds of her tight-drawn shawl, her eyes stared in colorless, fixed immobility, stared at us in a way that put creeps through my hair.

Not a feature in that white face stirred. Not a muscle under the white-dusted cloak. Face posed in that over-the-shoulder "come get me if you think you're big enough" expression, she stood. Not a mouse of sound from her, and motionless as rock.

It was Rallston who fractured the silence, and when that rascally Australian opened his lips the whisper came out of them like a rush of air from a broken tire valve.

"Good God! Farraday! It's a *statue!*"

WELL, I saw what had happened. That woman-daffy Australian's mind had been so stuffed with visions of his dream girl that, coming suddenly on a statue which met his romantic requirements, he'd failed to distinguish it from flesh and blood. There was always this wonder woman's picture in the cornea of his eye, and dust and a few shadows had tricked him. I started to give him a tongue-lashing. I was going to call him every name in the directory for bringing me across limbo to rescue an image. Then I stopped.

"I didn't know," Rallston was groaning. "I swear to God she looked real as life—"

Looked real as life? That statue *was* real as life! Rallston wasn't the only one who'd been tricked. The eye of his British military camera had been tricked, too. Anything that could deceive a lens made for penetrating camouflage had to be pretty lifelike, and I found myself staring at the sculptured woman's face in deepening astonishment.

Eye to eye with the thing, I couldn't drag my glance away. That sculpture had life to its very eyelids. Detail, chin, cheek, lips, a curl of hair on the forehead, texture of the shawl, the tight folds of the mantle outlining a lissom thigh, every detail had been carved to perfection.

How many statues have you known that could convey an expression? I'd been around the Louvre and I'd seen the Greeks. You'll suggest Praxiteles, and he was a master sculptor, but he never did anything as good as that woman in the cave. The figures in the Louvre were lumps of clay by comparison. This statue fairly breathed. Another moment and the lips would speak, demand us to take the chains off her ankles, be arrogant about it, too.

I couldn't tell whether she was marble or granite from the coating of dust, but whatever rock she was hewn from was vital in contrast to the burned-out slag of that wilderness. The thing came over me like a wave as I stared. Can you see the thoughts through my head? The first shock of astonishment followed by the second of awe?

I had to put out a finger, touch that stone to make sure. If genius shows in slavery to detail, if art means creating a verisimilitude to life, that statue had it. A master artist had done that piece of work. The greatest sculptor in the universe! It was a wonderful statue!

"It's wonderful!" I gasped at Rallston. "Wonderful!"

His voice was low, throaty. "The woman I've been looking for all my life —a statue!"

"Don't be a fool," I whispered at him. "This is worth a thousand flesh-and-blood women! Why, it's the greatest bit of carving in the world. To think these Arabs have kept it hidden in a cave. It must be over hundreds of years old, brought here by Arab pirates. But it isn't Athenian. That artist was long before Athens. Have you any idea what a thing like this is worth?"

I saw Rallston's lips had wried back in a grin. He was nodding, breathing hard.

"Come on, then. Let's get her out of here."

Looking back on that part of this story, I sometimes wonder if that atheistic minister's son hadn't put one over on me, after all. I sometimes wonder if he hadn't known it was a statue all along, hadn't pretended his bafflement and surprise. Guessing I'd never help him abduct any piece of statuary at the risk of my neck, he'd cooked up the woman angle, brought the snapshot to convince me because he needed my help in lifting the thing.

Well, he didn't have to convince me when I saw it, whether or no. I wanted that statue as I never wanted anything before, and so did Rallston. Any fool could have seen the genius in the thing. As to the lifting, both figuratively and actually, it was a job for two men.

Rallston attacked the chains fastening it to its platform, prying at the links with the spear, while I wrapped my arms around the statue and strove to shift its weight. Sweat broke on my forehead. The thing was heavier than three tombstones; must have weighed half a ton.

"Hold on," I puffed at Rallston. "We couldn't carry her out of here if there were six of us. We'll pull it on the drag!"

I sped a glance out of the cavern and up the beach to the walls of the moonlit town, expecting any second hell would pop. I didn't need any little bird to tell me what would happen if those Moslems discovered us pilfering their treasure. They knew the value of this statue, or they wouldn't have kept it hidden in a cave.

Then it occurred to me they might worship this wonder. Islam forbade idolatry, but there were tribes in Arabia who dated their customs to the days of Solomon and Sheba—if this image were a fetish and Rallston had spied it during some religious festival, there'd be triple hell if we were caught.

"Snap into it," Rallston goaded me breathlessly. "We've got to get out of here before that guard wakes up. Shove! Give her a shove!"

To this day I don't know how we ever budged that woman. The drag had no runners and we might have set out to move Mohammed's mountain. Teeth set, veins jutting, we put shoulders together and hands on the platform's end,

braced our feet on the cave wall and pushed like the twins of Hercules. On the stone floor Rallston's boots skidded and thrashed like the drivewheels of a freight engine trying to start on wet tracks.

We panted, puffed, swallowed oaths. Then for no reason at all the thing came unglued from its lethargy; platform and statue went slithering out into the moonlight past the upturned toes of the unconscious sentry. The platform gave a little scream as it scraped out over the stones, and for half an instant I thought the woman had come to life and voiced a cry.

My word, I did. I shook with anxiety, fearing the town would hear that screech, but the distant white walls went on sleeping, like the recumbent guard.

Rallston gave the guard a second crack on the head for good luck, and we started our wonder woman down the beach. Out in the moonlight, the statue was more wonderful than ever. There was something about that expression in stone that almost scared me. The curled stone lips, the sneer of the nose, the expression was more than a taunt, it seemed to jeer and invite at the same time—you've had women look over their shoulder at you like that?—and meanwhile the beauty of form rushed the blood to my forehead.

Rallston's voice came savage through his set teeth.

"Push, you idiot! Get her to the boat!"

If ever there was a madder kidnaping in history, I'd like to know it. It was easier sledding on the crusted sand. The beach sloped toward the water, and we skidded the drag at half a mile an hour, raising columns of white dust that stood up against the moon. The white dust was thick as gunpowder, acrid, bitter in the nostrils; twice I had to sneeze. I labored like a piano mover, darted nervous eyes at the sleeping town.

But a man will risk plenty when he's looking at a million dollars, and the statue was worth two million, or I was blind. When I thought of what the archeologists and art collectors would pay for the sculpture, desire gripped me like a drug. Rallston looked drugged, too. His gray-green eyes were shining as if coated with enamel. We were a pair, all right. A pair of deuces playing in a game with a joker.

Well, we got her down to the bumboat, and we smuggled her aboard. We worked like pyramid builders to do it, I can promise you. Rotted tackle snapped like thread, had to be knotted in a dozen places. That decayed deck boom bent like a sapling bough as we hauled and tore our fingernails, elevating the cargo inboard and lowering her down the hatch.

Get a picture of us loading that statue on that wilderness shore. Rallston broke her ankle chains with the spear, and we hoisted her up and let her down. I groaned in fear of breaking the brittle statuary. Lowering her into the bumboat's hold we splintered a chip from her shoulder, and it brought the tears to my eyes.

Down in the dusty gloom of the barge-hold—a box of a place about big enough for fifty sacks of meal—we struggled like stevedores to stow her upright in a corner. I don't know where the moisture came from, for the thirst was swelling my tongue against my teeth, but the perspiration was guttering on both of us when we chinned ourselves out of the hatch, slapped down the hatch-cover and rushed to the thwart amidships to grab the oars. I guess I'd forgotten how tired I was. I guess I'd forgotten a lot of things. All I could think of was the living expression on that stone statue's face and what the art galleries would pay to see it.

"But we'll never make it," I groaned at Rallston as we pulled the barge out of the headland's shadow and set her blunt snout for open sea.

Off the bows that saffron fog was

creeping in, and the long swells marched out from under the vapor banks like lava swishing molten out of steam. The barren headland, the junk-iron cliffs with that Valley of Death behind them, the Arab town at the end of the simitar beach made the backdrop for a play laid on the moon.

"If this *is* the Red Sea, we've miles out to the ship lane. Those Arabs will be after us like hounds when—"

Rallston laughed, and his laughter hardly sounded sane. Nothing was sane that midnight, I promise you.

"Suppose they do take after us—they didn't see us snaffle the woman, did they? There's other pirate ships on this waterway, and once in the fog we're safe."

My teeth were knocking together just the same, but premonitions aren't much good against thoughts of a million dollars. We pulled the blisters out on our palms, rowing out to reach that fog. We pulled with might and main, and the barge moseyed along like a Chinese junk, but we got there. I think the devil let us get there just to encourage us. Rallston had scuttled his religion for romance; I'd thrown over common sense for a fortune; both of us had fallen for the type of woman a man should let by; the devil encouraged us to let us down because we needed a lesson.

The lesson started just as we reached that yellow fog-bank. A Lilliputian chorus of howls splitting the silence along the shore. Torches dodging and darting along the beach. Arabs came pouring down the miniature walls of that distant town like fireflies swarming out of a hive. Guns snapped in crackling strings like boxes of crackers suddenly exploding. They must have seen us, because little fountains plunked and spurted in our wake. Next minute their boats were out, oars flashing, spreading across the water like a horde of many-legged water-spiders heading seaward. A bullet cut an invisible violin-string over my head.

"Row!" Rallston yelled. "They're after us!"

We stabbed our oars into the brine, and the fog plunged over us at a swoop. The regatta was on!

IT will be a long time before I forget that midnight row. The mist of that excursion is still in my head, and the prints of an oar-handle are branded on my palms. Have you ever been rowing at night when the wind dies and leaves the sea running, when everything is quiet above the surging water? Add fog to the business and you have something downright uncanny. The fog we burrowed into that night was mysterious as smoke from Aladdin's lamp.

Shots crackled behind us as our bum-boat collided with the fog-bank, and then it was precisely as if we had gone through a wall. A wall of gauze spread in layers above the wave-tops; then it was cotton, pulling, raveling, weaving around us as thick as an old man's beard. Deeper in, the fog was banked in piles like washed wool, great masses of aqueous wool heaped atop the water by invisible hands.

The wool swirled over us, dripping, smothery, silent. Kissed our faces, bandaged our heads, blurred Rallston to a shadow at my side. We were buried. Wrapped in a goose-flesh, creaming smother, opaque as the glass of a frosted lamp-bulb. A queer incandescence shone through the stuff. It wasn't blind. Perhaps like light seen by a cataracted eye. And there were rainbows, vague as the colors in an opal, arching in the formless clouds, the sort of other-world rainbows that moonbeams would cast.

On the thwart beside me, Rallston was pulling his oar with the automatic fury of some one pumping a colossal hand-car, and the teeth grinned in his errant face like a string of pearls.

"They'll never catch us now," he

bawled at my ear. "Row! Don't slow down!"

We weren't slowing down because we'd never gone fast enough to admit any slowing, but an illusion of decreased momentum affected by fog was not dispelled by the armada I knew was whooping after us. I knew those Arab feluccas were coming like Indian war canoes, and I slammed my big blade in the sea with all the energy of fear. Don't think that barge with that shanghaied lady weighting the bows was any trifle to row. She wasn't any college shell. She plowed through the mist with all the elephantine grace of a New York garbage scow butting a head sea of mud.

Rallston feathered his oar and sat with his ears cocked, listening.

"Do you hear them coming?"

"I can't hear anything," I confessed.

It was remarkably quiet when we listened. We couldn't hear a trace of those bloodhounds we'd seen astern. We might have been barging through the sky, save for the wash of water hammocking by abeam, the little wallops of brine that smacked against the bow and scattered miniature showers across our necks.

"They've missed us all right," Rallston chuckled. "It's been at least two hours since we saw 'em last, and they're off our course or they'd have overhauled us long ago. All we've got to do now is pick up a ship for Suez."

You see how it was? We didn't know we were on the Red Sea to begin with, but all we had to do was pick up a ship to Suez.

Of course there were a variety of other reasons why we might never pick up that ship. Conceivably such a ship might pick us up in the vapor and slice us like a buzz-saw cutting cheese. Or we might be rowing in a circle. Or an Arab broadside might catch us out of the mist. But we didn't think of that.

It doesn't do to navigate when you're in love, and we were in love. Rallston was in love with the cynicism of our lady passenger, and I was in love with her money. It would pay me back for the rifles and equipment I'd lost. More than repay me. Do you know what I was thinking as I rowed myself black and blue in that fog? Not that I was a thief, I can tell you. I told myself I was stealing the woman because she was a great work of art, a super-masterpiece that belonged to the salons of the world.

And I was counting the dollars the salons would pay for such a prize. The workmanship of the statue inspired me, but the dollars intoxicated me. Paris. Nice. Monte Carlo. No more grubbing with lizards. I had no more religion than my young assistant collector, that night! I was drunk as I rowed that barge.

And at every mile and every hour, deeper and deeper in the fog, I grew drunker. Not from anything to drink, either. My mouth had been bone-dry when we'd launched the cruise, and a few hours exercising at the sweeps had turned my tongue to a herring.

The fog was something. Tantalizing. I wrung drops from my cuffs, licked the beads from my wrists, but the taste of water only aggravated thirst a hundredfold. Just the devil's way of keeping us going. I'd have bartered my soul for a glass of wine, but every time I thought of the statue in the forward hold I forgot I had a soul.

I guess the good Lord thought I'd better be reminded of it, for I got a little jolt about then. Rallston shipped his oar, flung a fist to my elbow, dragged me down on the seat, froze.

"Quiet!"

We hunkered down on the thwart and bulged our cheeks with stifled breath. A sound of rhythmic splashing obtruded on watered hush. Cambridge, Oxford, two dozen racing crews were going by somewhere. We caught the murmurous cantata of many voices, and there was the merest suggestion of a shadow off to starboard, as of the passage of a

phantom ship tacking through imagination.

"It's them," Rallston gritted after an interval of baited silence. "Damn them, they're heading straight out. We've got to turn north."

"I don't see any compass in our binnacle," I choked. "How do you mean, turn north?"

We weren't doing any loud talking, believe you me. Rallston's words barely touched my ear. "A head sea coming in from the west when we put out. Take it on the port beam, we're going north. Row like hell."

For an hour that seemed a century we rowed like hell with the barge growing heavier every drag. As an extra goad to effort, the fog began to tear away in spots, rip and fray into fog-dogs—holes in the vapor where moonlight shafted down from a glimpse of open sky and our oar-blades crunched through a patch of glittering water dark as a whirlpool sighted at the bottom of a mine.

When we scowed through one of those openings we flattened like turtles on the thwart, holding breath, sick, expecting a fusillade from some mist-ambushed Arab craft to blow us out of water. But the enemy armada might have phantomed off into cloudland, set sail for the Pleiades. From the massed wool hemming us in there was only the sound of water underneath.

I don't know how long we played hide-and-seek through those fog-dogs, then, but I'd worn the flesh from my fingers, worked my spine numb and my tongue out—I'd have sworn we'd crossed the Atlantic—and I was dreaming of Paris again, when Rallston gave another cat-jump and blurted, "Land!"

I was a galley slave hanging on the oar-handle, cursing in disbelief. "Where?"

"Can't you hear what I hear, Farraday? Listen!"

"All I hear is running water," I husked. "I can't hear any—"

Then I caught it. A far-off muttering that had forced its echo through the fog from a distance of at least two miles, not unlike the long roll of muffled marching drums beating across a valley filled with rain.

Dilated, exultant, Rallston's eyes burned hot in his mist-smudged face.

"Surf!" he cheered the whisper. "Surf on a beach!" Leaping upright, he sent a triumphant glare across our bow, pointing a shaky finger dead ahead. "That's Egypt, by God; we've made the other side. We've done it, Farraday! Brought her over. Land! We're saved!"

Only we weren't saved yet. Not by a jugful. Rather, not by a boatful! His cheer wasn't out of his teeth when the barge broke through a rift in the mist, drifted out into a patch of moonlight. I don't know why I looked down at that moment. Not till then did I realize my feet were wet; I suppose my subconscious mind had been trying to tell me, but I'd been having too good a time in Paris, been too busy exploring the fog for enemies, to pay attention to wet feet.

Well, I'd heard a sound of water under the fog, and it was running, all right. Running right into the boat! Boiling up through the bottom-boards and gurgling in through the seams at about two quarts a minute. Too long that craft had been beached in the tropic sun. The weather on that scrap-iron coast had eaten the pitch and gnawed the timbering to punk. Those planks were drinking in brine like thirsty blotting paper. The bilge was up to my bootlaces when I looked, and I pulled my feet out with a yell. Rallston looked down and squalled.

"Holy Moses! We're leaking!"

That barge was something more than leaking. Having sprung one leak, the whole motheaten hull had opened the rest of its seams; gone porous as the

Dutch boy's dike. Stealthily, lazily as a hippopotamus submerging, the craft had begun to sink!

WELL, we were in for it this time, and Paris in the spring vanished right out of the bubble in my head. Picture that situation if you can. A girl-crazy lunatic and a naturalist who should have known better trying to kidnap a stone goddess in a scow of cardboard. Fog on a lost planet sea, and fang-toothed Arab pirates liable to be anywhere, and the ship going down. Lord, how that bumboat was drinking in the brine. It liked the taste. It had started slowly and developed a liking, and now it was gulping the stuff by the gallon.

Rallston stared at his flooded shoetops and went white.

"Bail!" he yelled, giving me a shove that knocked me off the thwart. "I'll do the rowing. Get that water out of here. Bail like the devil."

He snatched the oars and started pulling like a madman, while I bailed in the sternsheets like Noah's pump. I used my sun helmet to scoop with, and I might as well have tried to empty the Indian Ocean with a soup spoon. All the water I could jettison simply ducked down under our keel and sneaked in again, bringing a fresh supply with it. The seams were widening by the second, and I labored like an up-and-down in a Scotch freighter, dipping and throwing, dipping and throwing, with no more result than to see the intake rise to my ankles and start for my shins.

"She's going down," I had to pant. "It's coming in faster all the time. She's up two inches since I started."

Rallston slammed the oars into the swells and pulled as if to uproot the sea from its bed.

"We've got to make that shore off there, d'you hear? We can't lose that woman now!"

"But we're sinking deeper," I had to groan a moment later. "It's up to my shins. The water must be in that hold forward, too. She's started a list in the head."

Rallston dropped the oars to snatch the helmet from my fingers. "You row! We can't sit out here and sink in this tub! If this fog wasn't on us we'd be in sight of land. Keep going, man! Keep going!"

I rowed and Rallston bailed. Rallston rowed and I bailed. We spelled off and panted and swore and rowed and bailed, and now that it had started the caper that bumboat kept filling like a bathtub under opened faucets, staggering up over the hills of brine and wallowing down the valleys, a little slower, a little logier at each successive swell.

For the following half hour we fought to beat that sea inside and out, but it had us coming and going. Inside the brine climbed inch by inch to our knee-caps. Outside the hurrying swells rushed out from under the fog, grew off the bow, swept by with the whoosh of liquid glass, and I groaned each time our blunt-nosed barge survived the assault.

Land was ahead of us somewhere, no doubt of that. An echo of combers on a beach as difficult of attainment as Paradise. It wasn't for those who took the easy road. Our barge was too heavy for that ocean in the clouds. At each new swell the drunken hulk would shudder and stagger and swallow another gallon.

"Get out of the trough," Rallston shouted at me from the stern. "Another like that last on the beam and we'll go down."

I pulled my arms out to get her around, but she seemed to be settling in glue by that time, reluctant to swing. Her head was leaden. It rose and sank on the heaving floor under the fog with no more buoyancy than concrete, lowering a little farther at each swell like the head of some sea monster getting sleepy.

Rowing that hulk took the buoyancy out of me, too. We wallowed down a sliding liquid valley smothered with fog, and it was all I could do to drag her up the other side. Rallston was throwing hatfulls of water forty feet over his shoulder, but his efforts could do nothing for those spread bottom boards. Over his knee-caps in water, he bent at the waist and started fumbling around under the bilge.

I yelled at him not to stop bailing, and he showed me a pair of eyes red as rubies in the sockets of a skull.

"I'm going to get that woman ashore if we drown in forty fathoms. It's too late to bail. We've got to lighten the boat."

You know how balloonists throw ballast out of the baskets in the sky? You should have seen Rallston throwing ballast out of that sinking barge to keep us afloat in the clouds. First he got that iron spear we'd stolen from the Arab guard—dragged that spear out from under the thwart, splashed by me to scramble to the higher ground of the foredeck where he chopped down our mast at one whack. Crack! Sail, cordage, boom and tackle went overside, splashing off in the mist. The anchor went next, followed by the watercask, a length of chain, a box of rusted spikes, anything he could lay fingers on.

"Throw everything that's loose," Rallston screamed. "We're almost awash!"

The spear sailed from his fist and disappeared in the steam. Floundering aft, he dredged the bottom-boards for excess baggage, flinging overside a coil of waterlogged hawser, a carpenter's maul from God knew where, a link of chain, such rubbish as an urchin might discard from a pocket.

Do you think five pounds of junk more or less made any difference in that situation? I thought of the half-ton cargo in our forward hold, and it made me sick. Rallston stiffened upright in the sternsheets just then, and he must have been thinking of the same thing.

"There's not much else to throw out," he said in a high-pitched voice. "We're still sinking."

I didn't say anything. The water was lapping the thwart, and my mouth was filled with a taste like dry quinine.

"There's not much else to throw out," Rallston repeated in the same squeaky tone. "But her—" he pointed at the foredeck "—*and she's not going.*"

My lips cracked like an old cup as I grinned at him, nodding agreement. "Right. She's not going."

"Do you think I'd chuck that woman overboard after risking my life to get her?"

I shook my head. I could feel a little tendon throbbing under my left shoulder blade, and all the little hairs went tight and electric on my back. I whispered:

"I wouldn't chuck her overboard, myself."

"But there's too much weight," Rallston whispered. "Somebody's got to go."

I nodded, rising slowly from the thwart.

"And *she's* not the one of us that's going!" he squalled.

Water showered under our boots and we hit each other at the same time.

Now I'm not going to beg off responsibility in that assault by claiming I was crazy. I think we were both as crazy as bobcats when we went for each other —I'm certain we were—but it was the brand of craziness that comes from playing with money and wise women, and the judges won't take it as an excuse. What do you think the Admiralty Board would say of two boys who tried to throw each other overside to save a statue on a sinking barge?

Vividly I remember the pain of my knuckles landing on Rallston's jaw, the simultaneous explosion of stars as his own fist struck me between the eyes. *Wham!* That Australian boy's fist was chain-mailed. The blow drove me backward with the force of a donkey's kick,

and flung me head-over-heels over the thwart, smack down under three feet of bilge.

The bath cleared my wits a little, and I came up draggled and coughing in time to catch Rallston's rebound from the stern. His face looked madder than the grimace of Cain. A thread of blood leaked from one splayed nostril where my knuckles had contacted, and his grin seemed composed of a thousand teeth.

Gabled under a roof of wet hair that streamed in two dark triangles on either temple, his eyes had contracted, dwindled to sharp points of green glass imbeded in a face hot as a boiler-plate. Jaw out, snorting, fingers spread, he flung himself at me.

"She's mine! I found her, you perishin' jackal! Think you can pitch me overside, do you? She belongs to me!"

"You woman-crazy, triple-blasted fool!"

I howled, trying to fist him off. We fought. Slashed and slugged, wrestled, kicked, tore, each striving to knock the other over the gunwales. We weren't the first young men to go mad over a million dollars and a woman. In a way, our supercargo in the hold was both. Grimly, murderously, deadly as rival animals, we fought. Wrist-twists and rabbit-punches. Snarling and circling for position. Leaping in for the catch. Howling backwards with kicked shins. Rallston's fingers closed like locked manacles on my throat, and I drove my knee into his midriff, a blow that spun him around like a dervish.

Locked together, we fell, ploughed along the bottom-boards, rolling about under water, arms twined, legs hooked, strangling, thrashing, eyes bugged, and cheeks distended for want of air. We broke, kicked apart, plunged to our feet and danced back, shoulders bunched, heads down, measuring the second for another charge.

"Get off! Get off!" Rallston screamed at me. "You're sinking the barge, sinking my woman—"

"I'll go down with the boat if she goes," I promised him furiously. "But you're going overboard first—"

As he lunged at me then, I wrenched an oar from the rowing lock, jumped back, struck him across the mouth. He caught the blade in his hands, deflecting the blow, jerking me off balance. Dodging down, he snatched the second oar before I could stop him; planted the rounded handle in his arm-pit, charged me with blade pointed like a lance.

Whip! Crack! Slash! I'd like to have been a disinterested witness to the duel that followed. I'd like to have seen that battle aboard a barge sinking under opalescent fog, the oar-blades stabbing, whipping parabolas of light through mist, slashing together overhead, splinters shearing, slivers flying, the crack of wood on wood, the smack of wood on bone. What a joust that was! What a gallant contest of knights! What a lady for a prize, and what a field of honor! It sickens me to think of it now.

It sickens me to remember that the only thing in my mind throughout that battle was the million-dollar masterpiece in the hold at my back. When I thought of that precious image going to Davy Jones, I yelled and tried to break my oar over Rallston's head. Blow for blow, he gave me as good as he got, sometimes better. A score of times we teetered on the gunwale, whaling, fighting to keep balance, to stay aboard. There weren't any Marquis of Queensbury rules in that brawl. Eye for eye, tooth for tooth, it was. At that you couldn't understand unless you'd seen the workmanship, the genius in the absolute perfection of that statue. Unless you'd seen the living expression in that sculptured woman's face.

All this time the barge was wallowing lower and lower in that swinging brine, lurching down a jolt at each wave. Every time we felt another lurch we

went at it with doubled fury. If we'd been fresh at the start we'd have murdered each other first whack, but we'd been up too late the night before, worked too hard on empty stomachs and shriveled throats. I've an idea our blows and jabs were more sluggish than they seemed. Perhaps mental exhaustion sustained an illusion of top speed action that wasn't real, but the pain was authentic enough.

Our faces were cut open, and our fists red. Shirts sheared to tatters on our backs. I split my oar-blade on the side of Rallston's jaw, while he answered the blow with a slam on my head that nearly drove me through the leaky timbers of the bottom. Parrying, flailing. I forced him reeling into the stern. Back at me he charged, cutting strokes through mist that would have sliced my head like a melon if they'd landed.

"Damn you, Farraday! She's mine—"

"Over you go! Try that—that—another—"

OLDER men wouldn't have lasted. Only healthy young animals could give and take such a pounding. In those days I was wiry, and my skull toppled Rallston's by an inch. Life in the open had stored a lot of energy in my hide. He was built for an athlete, muscled like an orang-utan. My blows only enraged and confused him. His vitality seemed unquenchable. I punished his arms with criss-cross strokes, pounded his knuckles, couldn't chop his weapon from his fists. He beat me to my knees, crushed the ears flat on my head, brought the eyebrows swelled down over my lids, but he couldn't whip me out of that barge.

In the mist the oar-blades were flashing crimson. Water churning around our knees clouded maroon. Chips flew. Lungs whined. Believe me, I can't tell you how long the fight lasted, any more than I can tell you how long we'd been out in that foundering bumboat. Time loses outline in fog, and our battle stopped the clock. We might have fought five minutes, ten, but it seemed to carry on for hours, a year. A drear, nightmarish quality came into that fog-screened conflict. The nightmare of Rallston's unstoppable attacks. The nightmare of standing again and once more to beat him back.

The feeling was pounded out of me. My hands were without nerves. I know that battle lasted until even the illusion of speed was dissipated and the power to stand up and swing my oar seemed to come from some mysterious element outside my whipped frame, some evil sustenance loaned me by a far, black star. It takes a lot of punishment to rid the human body of avarice, and the last fight between men on this world will take place because of greed.

The barge was on her last legs, too. Brine was slopping over the gunwales, and the seas slanted tall, gathering power for their own killing punch. A big swell came rushing out of the fog, but the drowning hulk was every bit as stubborn as the fools fighting across her thwart. The punch-drunk hull gave a stagger and a groan, shook streams of brine from her drooping head, wallowed over the crest and lifted her foaming pug-nose clear for another gasp.

Crying that I'd sunk her, Rallston rushed me with swinging oar; caught me a screeching wallop across the cheekbone. Wood broke to kindling on my face, and thrown sidewise, shocked wide awake with pain, I brought my own oar down on his scalp with a smash that shivered my oar-blade to broom-straws. Both of us plunged over backwards; caught at the gunwale; hung. I can see it as if it happened yesterday—that untamed Australian pulling himself up to the rowing seat, panting and gargling, hauling himself together piece by piece as if broken bones were joining themselves under his skin, the effort standing green veins on his forehead, bringing the tongue through his teeth,

dragging himself upright with his oar for a crutch, inevitably, monstrously on his feet.

You know the picture of the dying Gaul? It made me think of that, Rallston coming up on his broken weapon. Head bloody, yes, and bowed. But on his feet. The tears scalded my eyes at seeing him there, and I cursed him as you'd curse an apparition, hauling my own carcass out of the bilge, forcing my own gruelled legs to a stand.

Propped on our oars, water gushing around our knees, backs sagged, faces dripping scarlet, we stood with the thwart separating us, eye to eye in the fog, two ruined gladiators sinking in our own misguided boots.

"Mine!" He brought the words with red bubbles through his teeth. "The woman—all—mine—"

"No, Rallston. No—" My head was too sick to shake. "No!"

As if by a common reflex we lifted the oars. Stood swaying. Lurched. Dropped our weapons. Fell together like scarecrows deprived of their wooden spines. Splash! Dropped like two cut-down bags of meal across the rowing seat.

A dark hill of water swept out of the mists to starboard, and the finish came.

But it didn't come from the sea. That finish came out of the fog. A chorus of howls breaking loose in the smother off the bow. The *plash, plash, plash* of a multitude of paddles. Shadows shooting in from all directions like mammoth shark-fins skating up through mist. Rows and files of merciless brown faces conjured out of vapor, and then the whole yowling regatta of dhows, nuggers, feluccas and sampans circling around us and engulfing us in a traffic jam as wild as a tie-up on the Yangtze Kiang.

I never saw so many rifles aimed at my head at one time. So many brandished knives. A hook-beaked Arab colossus, brown as a penny, black-whiskered, wearing a turban, was a figurehead posed in the foresheets of the nearest boat. His simitar looked bigger than the moon. He had grabbed up to heaven and caught that tremendous crescent in his hand. He let out a roar of coughing Arabic at his boatmen; his galley scraped alongside our half-submerged stern and he boarded us with the agility of a corsair, leaping at Rallston and me, simitar upraised.

"The image," he roared in guttural English. "We come for the sacred image, *feringi!* Return thy theft quickly, spawn of unholiness, and prepare to die!"

MYSELF, I prepared to die. I found no time to wonder at this Arabian behemoth's English, unexpected to that climax as a British accent on Mars. I didn't even wonder why our barge didn't plunge straight down under the weight of the pirate and his simitar. My neck was bared under that moon-sized blade, and I was too lame and tired to move. If the flooded bumboat didn't sink, my heart did then, and I couldn't lift my head off the thwart.

Rallston moved. I tell you, that Australian devil had more damnation left in his hide than a wounded tiger. He lifted his broken head, and even laughed. Sprawled beside me on the rowing seat, he reared up at the headsman towering over us and chewed a sound of mirth through his teeth.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he chattered at Blackbeard, "but if you don't get off this boat in half a nip she'll sink to the bottom. You understand English, you whisker-faced shark? Then understand you're talking to Captain Rallston of his Britannic Majesty's Corps of Signals and this is Lieutenant Farraday of the American Observation Service. There's an official camera under this seat to prove it, understand? We're on military assignment and got wrecked in this fog, and by God, if you know what's good for

you, you'll call off your pirates and have us put ashore."

It was a good bluff. A remarkable bluff. That boy was a super salesman, and when I think of how he blustered and stalled, half fainting and trapped on that foundering barge, I have to take my hat off to his gall. We were caught with the goods, but that superannuated lady-stealer wasn't licked yet. If he could stall a few more seconds the evidence would go down like the *Titanic* and we might get away.

He conjured a look of innocence on his pounded face that would have done credit to a saint. You'd have thought this Arab chieftan was no more than some irate papa who'd caught Rallston eloping with his daughter, but the girl was safely hidden behind the scenes. Image? What image did our visiting admiral mean? Sacred image? Where?

It didn't fool Blackbeard any more than Rallston had expected it would—that sheik knew we weren't any Captain Rallston and Lieutenant Farraday innocently wrecked to black eyes and crushed noses in the fog. What Rallston did expect was that our bumboat would go down like a plummet, and the bumboat refused to oblige. It wallowed level with the waterline while brine burbled over the stern and we clung to the thwart like rats on a raft. Blackbeard belted his simitar on a sash under his cloak and listened to Rallston's story with folded arms. Then,

"Move once," he snarled, "and my men will shoot the truthless heads from your shoulders. *Wah!* That would be a mercy compared to the tortures awaiting those thieves who dared steal the ancient image from the tribe of Haram esh-Shereef! The proof of that guilt will not be far distant, *ferengi,* and by Allah's Holy Prophet! I think your blood will flow when I see what cargo lies hidden beneath that forward hatch!"

He bellowed at his followers to train their rifles for a broadside, then went scrambling and splashing to the bumboat's foredeck, and ripped up the hatch-cover at a yank. He jumped down the hatch with a savage yell, and his armada of pirates shrieked with the glad prospect of a chance to torture the Christians when they saw him go. It was all up now. Overhead the fog was dissolving in watery light as if the dawn were trying to get through and make two scoundrels sorry they were seeing it for the last time. I pushed my bruised face down on the thwart, cold to the marrow with suspense.

"Rallston," I gibed him bitterly, "what do you think of your dream-girl, your daring wonder-woman, now? I wish I'd killed you before they do; it was your wonderful romantic ideas that got us into this."

"I won't go down prayin', anyway," he sneered from a corner of his bruised mouth. "I'll leave you do the howlin' to heaven for a miracle that won't come. I'll go to the devil like a man."

There was a submarine splash as Blackbeard lit in the flooded hold, and I could hear Rallston cursing the hulk because it didn't sink. I listened to that Arab chief trampling and wading down under the hatch; heard snorts, muffled exclamations, a fierce yell. Then I don't exactly recall how it happened. To Judgment Day I'll never forget the sight of that Arab's head bellowing up out of that hatch, the picture of him climbing up to the foredeck like a buffalo rising from a manhole, turban over one ear, cloak soaked to the armpits from immersion down below, paddling, puffing, his face—have you ever seen an Arab who found himself cheated in a deal? An Arab who'd wagered the wrong way?

He struck his forehead with a fist and glared dramatically up at the sky. Despair, humiliation, anxiety, fury fought for predominance on his features. It takes a raging Arab to speak in a voice of humility. He wrung his hands. stamped at Rallston and me, and wrung his hands. Truly, there had been a wretched mistake. Allah forgive this un-

warranted assault on the *feringi*. It was the fog, the cursed fog which deluded the eye, making lambs appear as wolves.

Could Captain Rallston and Lieutenant the *Amerikani* and the emperors of both England and America—on whom be the blessing—pardon him an error caused by fog? Of course, now the daylight was coming, we did not in the least resemble thieves. But had we by chance passed other small boats in the dark? What? The *feringi* had seen many others? Then by the Three-Fingered Hand of the Wife of the Prophet, there was no more time to lose! He would be delighted to assist us to shore, but there was not the time.

Salaam! Salaam! Farewell!

My next visual impression, that Blackbeard figurehead was back in the bows of its felucca. I give you my word, that Arab made a flying leap back to his own boat; I saw the pointed rifles withdraw like claws going into sheaths; saw those wolf-faced boatmen snatch their oars, sails go up like flags, paddles smack into the sea. Bag and baggage, that Arab pirate took leave.

He took the fog with him. His boats towed it after them as they rocked away, pulling the vapors astern to screen their departure. I was aware of pale blue sky opening overhead, a high bird planing in aery daylight. Sunlight sifted fans of gold over a cloud to warm a spreading view of waves. In the east where the fog was retreating, the Arabs were no longer visible. For a long time I lay immobile, staring at the place where Blackbeard and his fleet had gone.

Then I turned my head very carefully, and surprised a coastline off the bow. Not half a mile away a glimmering beach, where quiet surf laundered white rocks and olive trees stood green atop a cliff and distant hills sloped violet and purple in bright upper air.

The shore looked virtuous and peaceful. It had no affinity to that coast of our embarkation. Sunshine on water. Sparkling wavelets. Goats posed on rocks, and there was a pastel house among the olives. We had drifted from a land of goblins into another sphere. Only the sunken hulk bearing us toward this sunny beach remained as evidence to last night's nightmare.

"RALSTON," I whispered tentatively, wanting to make sure.

But it wasn't a dream. He voiced a sound like a croak to let me know he was there, and I screwed around on the seat to find him kneeling on the bottom-boards in bilge, arms hugging the thwart as if afraid to let go, head thrust forward, eyes staring. Drying brine had left a chemical deposit like diamond-dust sparkling in the tangles of his hair, so that his head glowed in the sun as if immortally crowned by some manner of halo. His face looked something immortal, too, crusted, swollen, harlequinned with rainbow-colored welts. His eyes, stuck in their sockets, were made of glass.

"Farraday," he whispered, "did you see some Arabs around here?"

"I thought—"

"Did a big black-whiskered devil jump down into the hold and—and climb out and go away?"

"It seemed to me—"

"Come on."

The hatch was open, and we crawled on hands and knees. Rallston groaned as he chinned himself down, and as I lowered myself after him, day came across the sky in a yellow blaze and the air was filled with light. You can't dream tropical sunlight, but the scene in that bumboat's flooded cargo hold had to be a dream. Sunshine poured down through the hatch overhead to fill the square enclosure with brilliance, and the water was clear and crystalline as a sea cave under the Bermudas. That six-by-six hold was shoulder-deep in water, water that had leaked in through the seams in the hull, but the planking was solid on the walls and bottom, and a half-

ton statue too heavy for a single man to lift can't get out through cracks.

Now laugh when I tell you that statue wasn't there. Laugh when I tell you that wonderful sculptured woman with her "come get me, I dare you" expression wasn't standing in the corner where Rallston and I had stowed her. No man could have budged that image. It had wanted block and tackle to get her aboard. Rallston hadn't touched her, nor had I; and Blackbeard had departed with empty hands. The statue had departed, too. She wasn't in her corner, or the other three corners; she wasn't on the floor. But there was something about the size of a lily pad and about the thickness of thin pie crust floating over the surface where the woman had been.

I stood with Rallston chest-deep in the water of that hold, sunlight cracking down through the hatch and ricochetting in white crescents off the little wavelets to make dancing reflections on the deck-timbers overhead—I stood with Rallston in that boxed-in pond, and we stared. How we stared!

It wasn't any pie crust, I can tell you. Can you imagine the skim of some white powder floating on the surface of a pool? Or the skin of a human face, the top-layer, say, of a death mask set floating in brine? The back of that mask was gone. The body wasn't there. Just the last outer film, the merest suggestion of that face remained afloat, as if sketched on the eddying ripples by a few strokes of dusty chalk.

"Look!" Rallston screamed. "Look!"

I saw it, all right. Misty as a photograph in smoke. An expression set adrift. The face of a woman looking over her shoulder, daring someone to "get" her—a mirage looking up at us from crystalline brine. Rallston's cry tore out of his throat in one exorcised devil of sound. Together we sprang. Together we rushed at that thing, hands out, like children trying to catch a reflection in a lake.

I caught it, too. How I caught it! I tripped over Rallston's boots and dived headlong, full face into that smoky expression, smack on the mouth. Those phantom lips in a phantom sneer! Can you see how it was? My face went into that thing and I closed howling lips on a mouthful of brine I'll not forget when the last trump blows. I swallowed a gulp of seawater that would have sickened a whale. I broke that pie crust face into a million particles; drank half of it; spluttered to the surface with that "come get me, I dare you" expression showering out of my fingers, pouring through my hair.

Rallston got some of it, himself. He flung a hand to his mouth and went up out of the hatch as if fired from a catapult. He was scrubbing his face when I pulled out of the bath to stand beside him, and that Australian renegade looked sick as a dog. Both of us did.

"Melted," he whispered. "My God—"

"That's why the barge didn't sink," I groaned. "This *isn't* the Red Sea! Do you know that coast over there?"

"I know," he said thickly. "Palestine! It's the *Dead* Sea!"

"That valley last night—"

"Gomorrah!"

He was praying on his knees when I went overboard. He fell to his knees as if he'd been sniped through the spine, and as I swam for the beach I looked back and saw him there. Kneeling on the deck of that half-sunk barge, face to the sky.

I didn't look back again. On the beach, I ran. There would be a well near that house among the olives, and I wanted a drink to wash that woman's expression from my mouth. But I'll never wash it out. Never! To this day my mouth burns with the taste, and I can see her face, defiant still, as my face fell to smash it in that bumboat's bilge.

WHEN Farraday stopped speaking, the twilight had melted to darkness in a miracle of its own, the Red Sea vanished to a path of bubbling phosphorus

in the liner's wake. The tall mountain abeam was a shadow under a star, and somewhere within reach of that shadow, before the days of the Suez Canal, the Children of Israel had run dry-shod between waves, while the following chariots of Pharoah were engulfed.

A bar of yellow light came from the steering-engine house and put a shining hard scar down the naturalist's profiled jaw. Mendel, the metallurgist, stared at his companion's face. His lips felt cold on the question.

"You mean that statue—it dissolved?"

Farraday nodded. "The water finished what those fanatical Arabs had been preserving in that cave for centuries. That southern coast of the Dead Sea goes back in history. It isn't a part of Palestine you read about in guide books. Nobody'd go there but a couple of young fools who'd lost their way. That land was cursed in Genesis."

The metallurgist winced as Farraday gripped him by the shoulder.

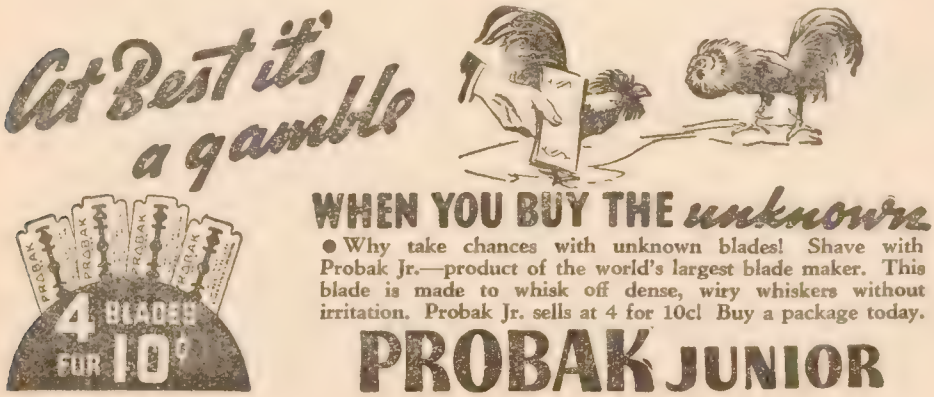
"You and your winds and tides!" the naturalist rasped. "You'll say some wandering Greek in the days of Praxiteles carved that image out of rock and left it there. Well, Praxiteles was an amateur compared to the hand that did that sculpturing. The greatest sculptor in the universe did that statue. Only the greatest creative artist in the universe could have captured that 'come get me, I dare you' expression in rock."

Farraday's eyes were bleak in the dimness. "And what kind of rock melts away? What kind of rock would disappear in the hold of a sinking bumboat and run out through the cracks? Not the kind of rock that Rallston's faith is built on, I can promise you. That atheistic, romance-crazy Australian was on his knees when I left him that day, and he's praying yet, from one end of Australia to the other. They say he's the greatest evangelist to ever start a crowd down the sawdust trail—his wife is a shy little woman who plays the organ—and a man has to be pretty sincere to pray in public these hardbitten days. I heard him recently on the radio, and what do you think his sermons are about? Miracles! His belief in miracles! Do you know what he uses for his text?"

Cold prickles moved up the metallurgist's skin. He waited with his mouth open a little.

Farraday was pointing toward the coast that was a shadow under a star, pointing in the direction of Arabia and the country beyond Arabia and the sea beyond that. His voice was low, husky on the quoted passage.

"'*And it came to pass . . . that he said, Escape for thy life, look not behind thee, neither stay thou in all the plain; escape to the mountain lest thou be consumed. . . . But Lot's wife looked back from behind him, and she became a pillar of salt.*'"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CHAPTER I

BAITED CODE

THE intercepted German cipher message over which Captain Fox Elton had been slaving for three days fitted at last into one of the endless succession of test keys he had perfected. With the final word of the cryptogram reduced to English, Elton sprang involuntarily to his feet and reached for the telephone. Then, the muscles of his jaw working convulsively, he sank slowly back in his chair. The message read:

> American agent Captain Farnham detailed by French to Coblenz via Swiss frontier at point 47=212=245=16. Left Paris last night for Berne to report to Lareaux. Urgent—M47.

Elton stared grimly at the sheet of paper. It told him that while he had struggled to strip the message of its secret purport, Farnham had crossed the German frontier—and into a hopeless trap. Probably, by now, Farnham faced conviction, perhaps execution.

The rasp of Colonel Rand's call buzzer brought Elton to his feet. Never before had the American counter-espionage chief jammed the buzzer with such urgent impatience. Elton hurried down the long corridor of the French caserne that housed American headquarters and entered Rand's office.

"Farnham's dead," Rand said, trying to speak without emotion. "Picked up by the Imperial secret service near Lake Constance, which means that he was barely out of Switzerland before they got him. Taken to Coblenz and tried. Executed this morning at sunrise."

"Sorry, sir," Elton said, the lines of his jaw tightening.

Colonel Rand lighted a cigar and leaned back in his chair.

"The Deuxième Bureau now demands that we send you across, Elton," he said stolidly. "Ordinarily my answer would be no. But the General insists that we must get that secret diplomatic report out of Coblenz at all costs. It means everything right now—in fact it must decide whether the United States sends another two million men across this fall and winter. But I'm not going to order you across, Elton. You've been in Germany three times—and know whether you dare take another risk."

"Did you figure on having me operate under French control?" Elton asked quietly.

"The Deuxième Bureau just phoned me—wants you to go," Rand said circumspectly. His face hardened, he clenched his thick hands. "But Farnham was the last man I'll ever put under French control! You are to do as you please this time, Elton, and I'll not quibble with you over details."

"Thank you," Elton said, smiling. "The fact that the French have a plane hidden back of Coblenz is mighty tempting, sir. The get-away is the hard part of a German invasion. But on the other hand, I'm mighty suspicious of a bad leak down in Paris, Colonel." He handed Rand the broken cryptogram. "Otherwise, how did Oberleutnant Volgatt know Farnham was going by way of Berne—and his precise route?"

"Damnation!" Rand exploded as he read the message. "Why, poor Farnham was doomed before he ever left Paris!"

"Exactly, sir. For that reason I'd like to spend at least a few hours checking things over in Paris before starting on my way."

"By all means, by all means!" Rand exclaimed. "Take all the time you want sizing things up—and stay out of Germany unless things look just right to you. You've already taken ten times your share of the hard risks. We've other agents. Besides, this Volgatt case you're on is mighty important itself—if you decide against Coblenz."

"I'm inclined, in view of that message, to look upon the two as more or less one and the same case, sir," Elton replied. "Any further instructions?"

Colonel Rand scowled over some hastily written notes on his telephone blotter. The news of Farnham's death had visibly upset him. Rand's wide, florid face was a muddy scarlet, his eyes were hard and slightly staring, his fingers shook under the tension of taut nerves. Despite his effort at maintaining an unemotional, official air, the detailing of Elton to this desperate risk was little to the colonel's liking, a hard duty imposed on him by higher authority.

"Colonel l'Ourcq of the Deuxième Bureau asks that you be in Paris by six o'clock, if possible," he said. "Wants you to meet his executive officer, D'Auteuil, at D'Auteuil's secret billet. But—as I said before—I'm leaving

everything to you, Elton."

"Very good, sir. I'll leave immediately for Paris."

TWO hours later a big observation plane put Elton down at the American flying field at Orlay. The commandant gave him an official automobile into Paris. After crossing the Seine he left the American car for a French taxicab and proceeded to the Meurice.

At the Meurice, having some time to spare, he had several cocktails. He was unable to shake off the shock of Farnham's tragic end. A capable agent, Farnham, who'd worked with Elton on the Von Kulm case in Switzerland some weeks before. Farnham's chances of getting into Coblenz, with French aid, had appeared a precarious adventure at best, but one promising hope of success to a man like Farnham, even though five French agents had been trapped trying to force the route by way of Koln to the north. And once in Coblenz, Farnham would have known exactly where to go to fulfill his mission, where to find the hidden plane that had been waiting long weeks for a passenger with vital dispatches for Paris. But the tip-off from Volgatt had stripped Farnham of even a gambler's chance, marked him for death before he left Paris.

Promptly at six o'clock Elton stepped from a cab at D'Auteuil's secret billet on Rue d'Escayarac. D'Auteuil himself answered the knock. That dapper little executive officer of the Deuxième Bureau smiled affably and took Elton's cap and crop with the customary French amenities.

"May I offer you a glass of mersault, my Captain?" D'Auteuil inquired as Elton sat down in the living room.

"I'm sorry to hear about Farnham," Elton said, taking the proffered wine absently. "What happened, *monsieur?*"

D'Auteuil shrugged and took a sip of mersault.

"I am very sorry," he said gravely. "But—the play it went against us—*voila! C'est la guerre*—and so we must try again and again until we succeed."

"Has it struck you as at all peculiar, *monsieur,*" Elton asked circumspectly, "that Farnham was the sixth agent to die trying to make Coblenz?"

"That is only war, my Captain," D'Auteuil said nonchalantly. "But if you mean—some treachery—who can say as to that? But at least there is little to substantiate it."

Elton passed D'Auteuil the broken cipher message from German agent M-47. D'Auteuil read it with a slight hardening of the lines of his face.

"The scoundrel Volgatt!" he said, handing the message back to Elton. "In some way there has been what you call the leak—in Switzerland. *Diable,* there has been some indiscretion, some loose wagging of an unguarded tongue!"

Elton gathered from the Frenchman's voice and eyes the imputation that Farnham must have talked too much, although he knew that D'Auteuil would not risk giving offense by putting such thoughts in words.

"But might not the leak have occurred in Paris, *monsieur?*" Elton asked laconically.

"Of such a possibility we are always on the guard, *monsieur.* It is that we suspect everybody—but in this case there is no proof. Our instructions affecting Captain Farnham were known in Paris to four men of the Deuxième Bureau—Colonel l'Ourcq, myself, Captain Duvore, who is in charge of secret codes for Colonel l'Ourcq, and Pierce Ducort, the colonel's typist. All are trusted men, devoted to the colonel, and of exemplary habits. Our men in Switzerland are equally discreet. I have in my billet here the records of all, including the reports of our agents who have watched each one of our agents. You are welcome to examine them if you please."

"Any new plans, *monsieur,* for an invasion of the Rhinelands?"

D'Auteuil shrugged again and lighted a cigarette.

"The dispatches must be brought to Paris, my Captain, without further delay. Marshal Foch is fretting himself at the delay, since the information they contain must be utilized in preparing for the fall and winter strategies. Colonel l'Ourcq expressed the hope to your Colonel Rand that you are available, Captain Elton."

"Colonel Rand told me to use my own judgment, *monsieur,* which means I'll probably pull out for the Rhine very shortly, with your good help. Do you mind if I check over the records you spoke of a moment ago?"

The Deuxième Bureau records of Allied agents were extended with French military thoroughness of detail. For more than an hour Elton pored over the reports, asking many questions. His attention fixed finally on the record of Ducort, L'Ourcq's confidential typist.

"I note that this man spends much of his off-duty hours with a woman, the two usually frequenting the Café Roulers in the Montmartre district," he mused. "I presume you have checked this carefully."

"Most thoroughly, my Captain," D'Auteuil assured quickly. "The woman is Yvonne Lafitte, niece of Yves Lafitte, an elderly Frenchman from Châlons who now conducts a millinery shop on Rue Lacrosse. Lafitte has always been a loyal man and very patriotic. He is badly crippled in his old age, barely able to move about the shop. His niece is a fitter and model whose wit is as simple as her face is pretty. Pierce hopes to marry Yvonne one day, but I imagine he finds it difficult because of his unhappy appearance."

Elton offered no comment. But the discordant note he found in the Deuxième Bureau's sheaf of records and reports was Pierre's. The man's face was hideously mottled. German shell fire had retired him from the front lines sans one leg, a nose reduced to a crooked stub, teeth bared by a taut scar that had been his upper lip. His face appeared a grotesque grimace. It would take a high order of patriotic fervor, Elton thought, to invest Pierre with heroic glamour enough in the eyes of the pretty milliner's model.

Elton offered no comment on this. D'Auteuil had dinner brought in.

"By the way, *monsieur,*" Elton said casually when they had eaten, "have you any German agents awaiting execution at present in your fortress at Vincennes?"

"But yes, a Herr Schissler, who was caught red-handed bringing a message through our front lines in the region of Belfort."

"Good. Is it possible to have him released to the Deuxième Bureau tomorrow—for experimental purposes?"

D'Auteuil's eyes lifted.

"Of course, my Captain. But you do not explain."

Elton took out his notebook and carefully framed a brief message which he handed to D'Auteuil. The message read:

> Agent X-21 on arriving from Berne today will report to Café Angers in R. de l'Opera, using rear entrance. He will wait incognito at third table on left until his report is received by waiter who will identify himself. Agent X-21 will then return to Berne. He will enter café promptly at nine o'clock.

"But—I do not understand, my Captain," D'Auteuil protested.

"Please give that to Colonel l'Ourcq in strictest confidence. He's to dictate it to Pierre and then have Duvore encode the message for dispatch to your Captain Lareaux at Berne."

"My Captain," D'Auteuil said, bristling just short of open resentment, "you suspect—"

"I suspect no one, *monsieur*—and yet

as you said yourself, I suspect every one. But after what's happened you mustn't blame me for wanting to know there's a clear field behind me before I jump over into Coblenz. Tomorrow night at nine we'll send your spy-runner into the alley to the rear of the Café Angers. If nothing happens to him—I'll be ready to start across the Rhine an hour later."

CHAPTER II

YVONNE'S BILLET ON RUE LACROSSE

ELTON remained in his room at the Meurice next day, scanning contour maps of the Rhinelands, perfecting alternate plans of his invasion of Coblenz and preparing an order of attack for a combat division which he sewed in the shoulder of his uniform. When, at nine o'clock in the evening, he went down to the curb, D'Auteuil drew up punctiliously in a French motor-cab. In the tonneau with the Frenchman was the captured spy-runner, Schissler, hands cuffed behind his back, staring in dumb hopelessness.

By a circuitous route they approached the Café Angers. D'Auteuil had little to say, but his manner showed he had little faith in Elton's experiment, that his principal concern was preventing possible escape of his German prisoner.

"You will walk down that back-street to the rear entrance of the Café Angers and on reaching it turn inside," D'Auteuil commanded Schissler. "I will keep you covered with my pistol and shoot you if you attempt to run away!"

D'Auteuil removed the handcuffs from the fellow's wrists and shoved him out of the cab. The German, looking nervously about him, slunk into the dimly lighted back-street. Elton watched the strange drama tensely. He knew that if the message he sent the night before had leaked to the German agents they would rise to the bait at any risks. In that event Schissler would beat a French firing squad by a few hours and die at the hands of his own kind.

Schissler reached the door unharmed, hesitated, looked about warily, and stepped inside. D'Auteuil shrugged and turned to Elton with an amused smile.

"*Voila*—nothing has happened!" he said. "My agents inside will return the prisoner to us in a moment. I was most positive, my Captain, that nothing could come of this, since neither Duvore nor Pierre—"

An excited waiter burst from the front of the café and began shouting for gendarmes. Elton and D'Auteuil sprang from the cab and ran inside. In the narrow corridor leading into the Angers from the back street a group of men were bent over a stark figure. The body on the floor was that of Schissler.

"He was stabbed through the heart as he came inside!" one of D'Auteuil's undercover agents reported excitedly. "We heard his cry as the blow was struck—but the murderer we did not see!"

D'Auteuil swung on his heel and led the way back to the motor-cab. His face was set in tragic lines, the blood gone from his face. Elton asked that they be driven at once back to the Frenchman's secret billet.

"Duvore — Ducort!" D'Auteuil exclaimed bitterly. "*Diable*, but such a thing, it does not seem possible! But now I must arrest them both—and the grill will tell us which is to die for such black treason!"

"On the other hand, I must insist that we do nothing for the time being, *monsieur*," Elton argued. "We have just gained a very valuable bit of information and we must put it to our own use."

"*Non!* It is impossible to delay action!" D'Auteuil shot back. "Colonel l'Ourcq must know at once—and within an hour his sharp tongue will force a confession. Then I shall lend to the

guilty man my own pistol—which will promptly bring vengeance from the traitor's own hand."

"Isn't the visit to Coblenz of far more importance than this, *monsieur?*" Elton asked coolly. "Besides, I am only asking that you delay for a few days."

"Your reasons, Captain Elton?"

"For one thing, I want to do some exploring of my own around Paris before I take off for Coblenz. More important, now that we've discovered this little audacity of Oberleutnant Volgatt's, I want to put his line of communication to our own use."

D'Auteuil debated in thoughtful silence until the car drew up at the curb in front of his billet. Elton understood clearly the play of the Frenchman's mind, his hot impatience to strike back at the German audacity that had invaded the Deuxième Bureau itself, to seal at once a scandal that would shake France if it once became known. As D'Auteuil stepped out, Elton asked the cabman to wait and followed only to the Frenchman's door.

"Will you please do me a favor?" Elton asked close to D'Auteuil's ear. "Have one of your agents go in half an hour to the Café Roulers and tell Pierre he must do some work at the Bureau. Tell him the cab will return him later to the café."

"You will, of course, act with great discretion?" D'Auteuil hesitated.

"You can count on that, *monsieur.* Also I'd appreciate it if you'd rig me up an Imperial staff uniform, grade of *oberleutnant,* some proper forgeries of German army orders, and hold ready a fast observation plane, piloted by one of your aviators who knows the Rhinelands thoroughly. I'll be back for breakfast at your billet, if you don't mind."

"At breakfast we will consider details, my Captain," D'Auteuil yielded, reluctance in his voice. "At that time, sir, we will come to a conclusion—and in the meantime I'll withhold my report from Colonel l'Ourcq."

ELTON made a brief reconnaissance by cab of the Lafitte millinery shop on Rue Lacrosse. It was an obscure little store on a dead street. Lights in the rear and at the second story suggested the place was used also for living quarters. Driving to the Café Roulers, a garish little drinking place in Montmartre, Elton swaggered in and found a small table. On the shoulder of his American uniform he had sewed the Indian head insignia of a famous American fighting division, on his collar appeared the ornaments of a division general's *aide-de-camp,* and his appearance and manner were those of a young officer in from the front for a frolic in Paris.

Pierre's grisly face loomed up from a table across the café. Beside him sat Yvonne, whom Elton identified from the Deuxième Bureau photographic record. He saw at a glance that she was not the sophisticated type of German agent, but the shallow, flashy sort D'Auteuil had described. Yet the play of her eyes suggested a quick, active brain and a certain craftiness and discretion.

Pierre was seated close to Yvonne. They were drinking anisette. While Yvonne was gaily responsive to Pierre's constant attentions, Elton noted that she carefully avoided looking directly at his mottled face. He wondered if the Deuxième Bureau observers had noted that hidden aversion with its significant trail of dire possibilities.

He had finished eating and ordered a second bottle of wine before D'Auteuil's agent finally came in and summoned Pierre. The French typist excused himself hurriedly, evidently with the assurance to Yvonne that he would return for her later.

As Pierre left, Elton centered his attention on the girl and shortly started a

flirtation. He wrote a brief note in French asking if he might share a bottle of wine with her. She read the note, shrugged, then gave him a fleeting smile. He went over at once and sat down in Pierre's vacant chair.

"I've been wishing you were alone, *mademoiselle,* ever since I came in here," he said lightly. "Now my wish has come true. Have you any preferences for wine—or shall I make the selection."

"As you please, *monsieur,*" she said with a coquettish flash of large black eyes. "But my friend will be back before too long."

"Not too soon," Elton bantered. "We should have time for some wine—and to go somewhere else before he returns. You see—I imagine your friend is always in Paris, while I am just down from the front for a few hours."

"But I do not know you, *monsieur,*" she countered.

"Surely you'll not stand out on such a little formality as that, will you? At least you know I've come a long ways to fight your battles—and speaking of battles, I'm facing a nice one when I return to duty. My first one—and you ought to help me see Paris before I return."

They indulged in light chatter, Elton subtly conveying the impression of light, off-duty irresponsibility.

"But you must be very discreet in Paris, *monsieur,*" Yvonne finally admonished, holding a finger to her lips. "Paris, have you not been warned, is filled with spies!"

Elton laughed inordinately.

"Damned nonsense, all this talk of spies." He tapped his left shoulder and laughed again. "Think of the silly rot of sewing orders in the lining of my uniform. Just as though Paris is filled with prying Germans. I laughed in the general's face over this, but he insisted."

Yvonne vigorously shook her head, her face sobered.

"But *non, monsieur,* you must not take this so lightly," she protested. "My friend he can tell you there are spies and that you must always be on your guard. The orders in your coat—you must not mention them again."

"Well, they're a nuisance," Elton said. "But anyhow they brought me good fortune. The general to whom I must deliver them in person has gone to Italy for two days and so I must wait around. But I'm sure, if you'll be hospitable, two days will pass too quickly!"

"Perhaps, *monsieur,*" she said with a coy smile, "I should watch after you to see you do not fall in with bad company."

Yvonne finally yielded, after what Elton thought the right amount of discreet remonstrance, to his proposal of a ride about Paris. The girl, if a German agent, handled herself skillfully enough, so that Elton was in some doubt as they took a cab to the Bois de Boulogne. She made no further reference to the orders secreted in his coat.

Elton, after they had spent an hour sipping wine at a café in the Bois, grew more loose tongued and somewhat boastful. Gradually he let it slip that the orders outlined the plan of battle of a division, and need only a final signature of approval which he had come to Paris to get.

At midnight Yvonne pleaded weariness.

"Besides, my poor uncle, Monsieur Lafitte, must not be left too long alone," she announced. "He is very old and unable to help himself and at midnight he will want his cup of chocolate and hot rum."

As they came to the Lafitte millinery shop, Elton was still uncertain. He decided upon a bold test, one that would end the quest for the night if it failed.

"Well, I suppose here's where you pass me up," he said resignedly, extending his hand in good-by. "But how about getting together for dinner tonight at the Chapeau Rouge?"

"But you may come in for a few moments, *monsieur,*" she said at once. "Monsieur Lafitte may let us have some of a rare old wine he brought to Paris from Châlons."

Yvonne led the way through the millinery shop to a living room and lighted a lamp. The place was cheaply furnished, conforming in detail to what one would expect to find in such a billet. Elton sketched the place over in sharp appraisal. He was still uncertain about Yvonne, although her action in asking him in sharpened his suspicions. She went at once into another room and was gone several minutes. When she returned she brought two glasses of red wine on a wooden tray.

"*Oui,* my uncle says there is a glass of his precious wine for the American officer!" she exclaimed gaily.

"Here's to your good health—and to getting better acquainted," he rejoined, taking the glass nearest to him on the extended tray and raising it.

Elton pretended to drink. Something in the girl's manner told him as distinctly as if she had confessed that the wine was drugged, that Yvonne had risen to the bait of the secret orders sewed in the shoulder of his uniform. Under pretense of admiring an old French lithograph he dumped the wine. She glanced at his empty glass.

"You have not said that you like Monsieur Lafitte's fine old vintage," she complained. "Yet very few are so honored by my uncle, *monsieur.*"

"Perhaps I shouldn't have gulped it," he said. "It was truly wonderful—the soft, fine kind that would put one to sleep if he drank enough of it, *mademoiselle?*"

She started slightly at his words, then quickly concluded that he must have spoken lightly. Particularly since there was neither suspicion nor accusation in his face or manner. Elton chattered with the light abandon of a man half tipsy and presently yawned. A moment later he yawned again, stretched and got to his feet.

"Guess I better call it a night," he proposed. "Don't ever remember being so sleepy. Just can't keep my eyes open much longer. Do you think I can find a cab around here, *mademoiselle?*"

"Of course, *monsieur,*" she exclaimed. Her eyes were flaming now in high excitement. She pointed to a sofa and asked him to sit down. "We will have another glass of wine together—then you must go," she added, and hurried out of the room.

Elton yawned several times, sprawled on the sofa and pretended to fall off into a heavy sleep. He guessed that he was being observed, that every word and action had been appraised by shrewd eyes from the instant he entered the billet. Monsieur Lafitte could only be the agent of Oberleutnant Volgatt, might even be that deft masquerader himself.

In that event Elton knew the critical danger that lay ahead. His right hand, plunged deeply in the bellows pocket of his tunic, gently released the safety of the little French automatic that reposed there.

After tense minutes of waiting, Yvonne returned empty handed. She felt his pulse, listened to his heart, then shook him vigorously. Elton offered no response. A man stepped into the room, an elderly man with a thick gray beard, the sallow skin of an invalid and eyes that appeared mere blurs behind thick lenses. He hesitated, leaning heavily on a large cane.

"He's clear out, *monsieur,*" Yvonne said, "and'll not wake up in a hurry."

The man straightened, laid aside the cane and removed the thick lenses, disclosing cold, level gray eyes, the eyes of a young man. He walked over to Elton and surveyed him critically.

"All right, Yvonne, get your scissors and snip out his sleeve," he instructed. There was a slight shade of amusement in his voice as he added, as if sharply

suspicious of a trap, "You may have brought in a drunken fool—or again he may be an Allied agent—and rather than take any chances, I think I'd better slit his throat in a minute."

CHAPTER III

A MESSAGE FOR LAREAUX

ELTON'S heavy breathing was unaffected by the German agent's taunting threat. Nor was there the slightest response of tension in his face or body, except a slight closing of a finger on the trigger of his automatic. Yvonne brought scissors and skilfully snipped away the thread at Elton's shoulder. She gave an excited exclamation as her handiwork disclosed a thin sheaf of folded papers.

The German agent took them casually and examined them, looking back every few moments at the man on the sofa. But his interest quickly centered in the document, orders of combat for an American division attacking on the right of an American corps. The orders were in full military detail, setting forth the commander's decision, objectives, scheme of maneuver and organization of combat teams.

He paused to ask Yvonne many questions, then read the orders through a second time with great care. There was a gloating note in his voice as he spoke.

"This ought to tell Von Ludendorff something interesting," he exclaimed. His habit of suspicion returned for a moment. "If this isn't bait—you've done a fine piece of work tonight, Yvonne. Even more important than teasing news out of that orang-utan of yours."

"But I've told you, Monsieur Volgatt," Yvonne exulted, "that I could do bigger things than coax that French nitwit—and I'd rather take poison than let him kiss me again!"

"You're an excitable, empty-headed little wench and nothing more!" the German snapped. "Don't ever mention my name again in Paris, if you know what's good for you! Now we've got some work to do—and the first thing is to dispose of this sleeping dummox. His body's got to be in the Seine before daybreak!"

"But *non, monsieur!*" Yvonne protested. "I don't want that to happen—in here where I have to sleep. I can sew his sleeve back—and we can copy his papers, and when he wakes up I can send him on—and watch him while he's in Paris."

Volgatt debated this briefly, then reached for pen and paper.

"Now and then you do show a flash of good sense, Yvonne. If we had a copy of this order—and the Americans did not suspect it—what a mess the Americans would make of their attack! Come, you may read this to me while I copy it."

For half an hour Volgatt sat writing while Yvonne read. From time to time Volgatt paused to scrutinize his victim. On the table beside close to his hand the German kept his automatic handy for use. But Elton had no thought of attack, even though he saw that he could quickly seize the advantage. There was bigger game than Volgatt at stake right now, and he had decided to let the German agent slip through his fingers.

Yvonne restored the bogus order to its place and sewed the sleeve neatly back. Volgatt, having convinced himself that the evening had brought him rare good fortune, left the room with barely a glance at Elton, whom he had accepted at last as a witless victim.

"When the swine comes to, get a cab for him," Volgatt directed. "Better keep him discreetly in tow again tonight, but use your head. A little jealous play between him and your French gorilla might be a good idea if you don't overplay

your hand. But don't let your head swell, and remember—you're not too smart."

ELTON judged the hour to be around three o'clock but did not dare risk a glance at his watch. He knew that he must carry out his masquerade, lie on his back for another hour or two. Volgatt, he guessed, had retreated to start a spy-runner for Spa with the captured American battle order. From Spa would come prompt demands for further confirmation. Elton smiled inwardly at this thought. The *Herr feldmarschalls* would not want for information if things went as Elton now planned.

During the long hours that followed he put in time planning the day's events. A precarious adventure lay ahead, but Elton's plans were now crystallized, audacious plans of the most precarious danger, yet whose rewards to the Allied service warranted the risks. Yvonne went to bed without undressing, and when, in the first gray light of approaching dawn, Elton stirred and sat up dazedly, she sprang out of bed.

Elton muttered in thick incoherence and rubbed his head.

"What's wrong?" he grunted, getting to his feet. "I got to get out of here into the fresh air!"

"You drank too much, *monsieur*," Yvonne told him anxiously. "You dropped off to sleep—and I shook you for a long time but couldn't wake you up. Please, now you're awake, let me get you a cab. Those who work in the shop will arrive soon and they mustn't find you here!"

Yvonne went for a cab and returned in a brief minute. Elton surmised from the promptness of its appearance that the cab must be manned by a Volgatt spy. Accordingly, avoiding Yvonne's reminder of an engagement for dinner, Elton asked to be driven to the Meurice. He went upstairs to his room, changed into a French uniform and left the hotel, taking a cab to D'Auteuil's undercover billet.

The Frenchman was up and at breakfast.

"*Bien*, my Captain!" D'Auteuil exclaimed, coming forward eagerly to greet his visitor. "But you are in time for breakfast—and perhaps while we have our coffee, you will tell me what you have learned in Paris. Your eyes tell me you have had no sleep!"

"I'm supposed to have had a lot of very deep sleep," Elton said with an amused smile. "But for the time being I really have nothing to report. May I trouble you first of all for a sheet of your official stationery?"

Elton hurriedly set down a message whose wording he had planned while lying on Volgatt's sofa behind the camouflaged spy nest on Rue Lacrosse. It was addressed to Captain Lareaux at Berne, and read:

> Captain Fox Elton, American agent, will report to you at once in Berne. Left for Annemasse on morning express and will cross frontier tonight incognito. Get him through frontier into Germany at once. His attempt to reach Coblenz must not fail. He will return via front lines south of Belfort. Urgent.—L'Ourcq.

When he had read the message, D'Auteuil looked up in undisguised perplexity.

"I merely want to take advantage of Herr Volgatt's unusual means of information," Elton explained. "This must be put into code the first thing this morning, after Colonel l'Ourcq has dictated it to Pierre. Then I want Pierre to have the afternoon off duty—and you might give him ten francs along with some friendly compliments on his work."

"But, *monsieur*, I am not certain that Colonel l'Ourcq will consent. The colonel will be very impatient to deal with the traitor and—"

"I'm assuming you'll make no report at present, *monsieur*," Elton broke in.

"If you agree to that, I intend to leave tonight by plane for Coblenz."

"The request, my Captain, it is to me most embarrassing. It is my duty to speak to my superior in a matter of such importance!"

"Sorry I am forced to insist, *monsieur.* But this audacious Prussian scoundrel knows he is out on a very thin limb tapping your Deuxième Bureau. Therefore the slightest circumstance may arouse his suspicions. Colonel l'Ourcq, as you've suggested, would proceed instantly to clean up his bureau—which is only natural, since his own reputation is involved. But if you'll give me three days of silence, I'll make my try at Coblenz. Even if I fail and don't get back, I'll leave behind Herr Volgatt's address for you—where you can clean up on his whole nest."

D'Auteuil half rose from his chair, his eyes on fire.

"My Captain, you mean you have identified in Paris this scoundrel Volgatt!" he demanded.

"I'm as impatient to get him in the net as you are," Elton replied quietly. "On Farnham's account I'll enjoy the spectacle of that fellow in front of your firing squad. But there are bigger stakes in this game, *monsieur,* than Volgatt, even than the dispatches from Coblenz. The Imperial secret service is skating on very thin ice and if we can practice a little discreet patience for a few days—we may get the German army into a tangle that it'll take an armistice to get them out of!"

CHAPTER IV

ACROSS THE RHINE

THE French pilot, as the observation plane came into the region of the German frontier shortly before midnight, climbed steadily to a height of six thousand meters. Letting a secret passenger drop from such an altitude was a precarious undertaking, since there was no estimating, within a mile or two, the precise area in which he would come to earth.

But Elton had chosen that risk to one of fanning possible German suspicion by flying over the Rhine at any lesser height. Their course out of Paris had been across Belfort, near the Swiss border, then north along the Rhine. The engines in the big plane were German and the fitful burr of their motors would be recognized as such by the German intercept stations along the war boundary.

Elton know the reckless gamble he took in this direct invasion of the Rhinelands. His hope was that the German secret service, receiving the tip-off from Volgatt of Elton's coming, would rush their ablest agents on the route from Switzerland north to Coblenz. Their net would have to be a wide one to cover that whole route. Nor, after having taken six Allied agents on their precious information from Paris, would they be likely to suspect a ruse this time. With that advantage Elton argued that he would have only the military police and local agents to deal with, which usually meant outwitting just so many geese.

There was no moon. A mottled sky dimmed the meager starlight. Through the rifts Elton saw from time to time the silvery glimmer of the mighty Rhine. His pilot had bombed Coblenz, knew the Rhinelands thoroughly from the air. But the point of landing by parachute was one for chance to decide. In the broken countryside about Coblenz Elton knew he might land astride the top of a high tree, or down the jagged face of a cliff or, by some dire mischance, in the heart of the German city. But he dismissed these risks as only a part of his desperate play for high stakes, and perhaps the least of the dangers he must reckon with once he went overboard from the plane.

Two silvery ribbons converging below

was his signal to get ready. They meant Coblenz, lying under the meeting place of Moselle and Rhine. He crouched in the cockpit until his pilot stalled the ship, then went overboard into the black void. The parachute opened smoothly.

Observing below as he drifted downward, it seemed that the two rivers were leaping up at him, their breadth expanding swiftly. Since there was no wind, he reckoned that he would land well clear of the water and some little distance to the right of Coblenz.

As the black mass of the earth suddenly took substance and seemed swirling upward to meet him, Elton made out the blacker outline of broad flat buildings. He tugged frantically at the ropes of his parachute in order to work clear of those buildings below him. Vaguely the fear flashed into his mind of a caserne. Even in the stress of that critical uncertainty of landing he smiled grimly at the thought of landing in a German armed camp.

By deft manipulation of the ropes he managed to avoid the roofs under him, but the stolid, martial array of stark black buildings left him in no doubt. A moment later his legs buckled under him from the impact on hard ground. He floundered about, trying to get on his feet and unfasten the harness of the parachute.

A sharp challenge rang out followed by a stab of flame in the darkness.

The sentry fired a second shot, advancing on the mysterious intruder who had dropped floundering into the caserne out of the sky. At the same time he bellowed for the corporal of the guard. Elton got free of the tangle of silk and rope, gained his feet, now coolly in possession of his faculties. Another stab of flame and a fourth. He drew his German army Luger and leveled it quickly and calmly.

At the vindictive bark of Elton's automatic, the sentry plunged forward on his face, his Mauser clanking to the ground almost at Elton's feet. There was the sound of men tumbling out of bed, a door banging open. Sentries in the distance were spreading the alarm lustily.

Elton centered his full attention upon the parachute. With deft swiftness he gathered it into a bundle. Near-by, at the end of a barracks building, stood a covered military truck. He ran on his toes to the vehicle and cast the parachute inside, then turned to face the tempest that was now forming in the military street.

Lights flashed on in near-by windows, men shouted in the darkness. A high thin voice irritably demanded to know what the disturbance was about. Then there was a hissing sound and the darkness was shattered by a bright, greenish light. Some one had touched off a ground flare.

Elton had gained the cover of a building. In the first light he saw soldiers pouring into the street, some with muskets, some with pistols, all in high excitement. He stepped out into the street. Men were grouping about the dead grenadier.

"Drunken brawlers!" he barked in German. "The sentry is dead—now get back in your quarters! The guard will look after this!"

The sharp commands of the figure in officer's uniform had the magical effect of water on fire. This strange violence, fifty miles behind the fighting front, was suddenly stripped for the moment of its mystery. In the habit of obedience men turned back into quarters, muttering, leaving the dead man and the quest for his assassins to the guard.

Elton walked sharply on between barracks buildings. The flare was fading. He stepped back in the shadow as the guard detail came pounding up, then moved on at a sharp pace. Through one line of barracks after another he passed, reached the limits of the caserne, vaulted a low stone fence and headed across a

parade grounds. On the other side of this field he came to a road. Keeping to the edge of the road, which was lined with trees, he made his way to the low slopes overlooking the Rhine and Coblenz.

Behind him he heard no commotion now. Doubtless the officer of the guard would set in motion the wheels of orderly investigation. That word of drunken brawlers would pass along, the presence of every soldier in quarters would be checked, all absentees on pass would have to be inquired into. But Elton knew that with daylight, at latest, would come discovery of the telltale parachute in the truck.

He swore bitterly at this ill fortune. There had been no way of disposing of the parachute. Once it was found Elton knew that the warning would be flashed into Coblenz, the city would be combed, a hard vigil closed down in which all passports would have to stand the test of sharply suspicious eyes.

His decision quickly shaped itself. Once the alarm of a parachute visitor was spread, the Rhinelands would be a hive of Prussian secret service activity. Even if he escaped, Elton knew that his whole plan would fail. His failure to appear through the Swiss frontier would warn the Imperial agents who the parachute visitor must be, tell them quickly that Volgatt's masquerade had been stripped.

His pace quickened. He knew that he had only the hours until sunrise, at most, in which to complete his mission in the Rhinelands. He broke into a run down the long slope to the river, hurried along the Rhine to Schiffbrucke, crossed over into the main city. The streets were deserted except for patrols. He walked on in a fever of impatience. It was now close to two o'clock and without transportation he knew he could not cover the long route ahead.

Finally a dilapidated horse-cab trotted by. The driver shook his head at Elton's

summons; the cab was occupied. Elton ran into the street and forced it to a halt. A fat, middle-aged man bustled out in a high dudgeon. Elton started as he caught the insignia of an *oberleutnant* of the line. With the officer was a woman.

"What damnable impertinence is this that you dare halt my cab?" the colonel bellowed. "I'll have your name and rank —and report this matter to the provost marshal in the morning, you young buffoon!"

"Oberleutnant Gavorz, Imperial headquarters, Herr Colonel," Elton presented himself in a level voice. "I'm sorry but I'll have to trouble you for this cab since there is no other in sight. It is on the emperor's business! Most urgent."

"If you claim it on the emperor's business, I yield cheerfully," the colonel decided. He helped the woman out of the cab. "But I'll wait here expecting you to send me another cab from the Rhinestrasse."

Elton compelled the driver to force his old nag into a goaded trot. A drive of twenty minutes took him to Ludwigstrasse 82. Bidding the cabman wait, he hurried down Ludwigstrasse to No. 54, the billet in which his French pilot masqueraded in waiting.

A decrepit old man came to the door after Elton had pounded for several minutes. The man bore a smoky kerosene lamp which shook fitfully in the old fellow's palsied hand.

"I must see Herr Muller at once," Elton said.

"I am Herr Muller," the other said in a dry, piping voice. "What is it you want, Herr Leutnant?"

"You're an older man than the Herr Muller I'm looking for," Elton said, enunciating each word of the French identification formula carefully. "You are past sixty, and the man I want to see is thirty-nine, or will be on the tenth day of next June."

The ague disappeared from the old man's hand, the stoop snapped out of his back.

"Come in quickly," he said in a low tense voice, and closed the door sharply behind his visitor. "The devil, but I thought I was going to have to wait forever for some word. What is the news?"

"How far is your plane from here, *monsieur?*" Elton demanded in an undertone.

"On some heights back of Glockenburg, a distance of ten kilometers," the French agent said.

Elton's face fell. He scowled at his watch under the dim light of the lamp. The hour was past three; there was little more than another hour of darkness.

"It is ready to take the air, *monsieur?*"

"Only today I checked everything, *monsieur,*" the pilot replied. "But it is only a miracle that it has not been found in the old barn where I have it covered with some millet. *Diable,* but I've been expecting to find myself in a trap every time I go there!"

"Get into your clothes, *monsieur.* We've got to get in the air as quickly as possible!"

"You have those dispatches from Berlin then?" the Frenchman asked in sudden eager excitement.

"That's my next move, *monsieur,* and there's no time for questions," Elton rejoined sharply. "A few minutes may mean the difference between breakfast in Paris and—the end on an empty stomach. Now see how fast you can get into your clothes!"

CHAPTER V

THREE MUSKETS

THE Allied secret diplomatic agent in Berlin had acted with great caution in dispatching his priceless report of interior Germany by a French spy-runner who was to carry it from Berlin to Paris. He

had ordered the courier to hide the report at each halt along the route, and on reaching Coblenz to deposit it at a designated point before contacting the secret pilot who was waiting for him there.

The designated point was in the false top of an old wine cask in the cellar of a billet on Schlosstrasse that was used by French agents making the Berne-Berlin run in the early months of the war. Having hidden his report, the runner had reported the fact in an inoffensive letter mailed to the undercover agent at Berlin. As a result of this precaution the spy-runner's capture, effected before he could locate his pilot, left the report intact in Coblenz, a fact reported in a cryptic business telegram to Holland that was repeated to Paris.

Elton chafed under a fever of impatience as he pounded back across Coblenz with the Frenchman behind the broken old cab horse. His eyes were on the luminous dial of his watch every few seconds and it seemed to him that the hands were moving in a diabolical frenzy of speed. Three-thirty o'clock, daylight in another hour. And he knew that with reveille at the caserne that parachute would bring the alarm into Coblenz.

On passing across Rhinestrasse he saw a motor-cab. The driver was in a café. But since time was now his pressing consideration, Elton went inside and routed the fellow out. He handed the cabman a note of fifty marks.

"Another hundred if you keep your bus rolling and make no slips," he baited the cabman.

"*Jawohl,* Herr Oberleutnant," the German said with enthusiasm. "I am glad to serve, even if you pay me nothing."

On coming into the Schlossplatz, Elton left the cab and Frenchman parked at the curb near the point where Schlosstrasse converged with the public square. His destination was a matter of two hundred feet, the billet of Frau Fenstermacher, an Alsatian who was listed by the Deuxième Bureau as a loyal German. It was further recorded that the woman had no suspicion of the nefarious French shadows who occasionally stopped at her place, that she probably had not the remotest thought that her wine cellar was the repository of a document that had cost six lives and was worth a king's ransom in Paris.

Elton transferred his Luger to his tunic pocket and released the safety as he stepped up to the door and dropped the brass knocker. In a few minutes a fat old dowager with kindly face and inquiring eyes opened the door. At seeing an officer a puzzled look crossed her face.

"You are Frau Fenstermacher—and have billeting space?" Elton inquired.

The woman blinked at him and shook her head.

"But my poor house is filled with soldiers," she said. "In every room and bed, and even some sleeping on the floor. I can take care of not another one, Herr Leutnant."

Behind her, under the glow of a kerosene lamp, Elton saw a coat rack laden with field-gray overcoats and helmets. The muscles of his jaw contracted, then relaxed into a smile.

"I understand that very well, Frau Fenstermacher, and I'm sorry to disturb you at this hour of the morning," he said quickly. "But I'm compelled to make a certain search, which will take only a few moments. I'll be very careful not to disturb your soldiers."

The woman gaped astonishment.

"But my house has been searched so many times," she protested. "Only yesterday it was combed fine, even my picture frames taken apart. I don't understand."

"I have my duty to perform and will try not to cause you any inconvenience," Elton insisted.

He stepped inside, went direct to Frau Fenstermacher's kitchen and asked to be shown into her cellar. Her shrug told

him that the cellar, too, had been searched. The woman gave him a lighted kerosene lamp but did not go with him into the cellar. Elton moved with quiet haste, examining one old cask after another for certain vague scars that would identify the hiding place of the dispatches from Berlin.

In a few minutes he located the cask, a container of heavy oak, green and mildewed from long service in the dank cellar. His pulse rose as he picked up a chisel and attempted to remove the top. The top was obstinate and he worked in a fever of impatience for several minutes. When it failed to yield to the chisel he caught up a heavy wooden mallet and crashed it through the top of the cask.

Under the splinters he saw a flat object wrapped in black oilskin. An instant's examination told him it was the hidden dispatches from Berlin. Thrusting it under his coat he turned to the stairs. If the blow of the mallet had disturbed Frau Fenstermacher's billet guests, Elton meant to be out of the house before they could investigate.

HIS foot was on the first step of the stairs when the light of a strong flashlight struck him full in the face. The rays came from the doorway above. Elton scowled into the light and swore.

"You will put your lamp down!" a voice commanded him.

The man with the flashlight descended with measured tread. The muzzle of a German army pistol loomed ahead of the figure. As the intruder came within the range of his lamp, Elton identified the uniform of a German officer, a thick-set Teuton with a squarish, leering face.

"You've been slow in reaching here, but I was sure you'd come," the German sneered. "You'll turn your back and elevate your arms while I search you to see what you've found down here!"

Elton, glaring back at the fellow, laughed disgustedly. He brought the oilskin square from under his coat and shook it at the officer.

"If I've been slow coming here, my friend," he taunted, "it may be no fault of my own. His excellency, the colonel-general, probably had a right to think some one in the Coblenz garrison could find this thing without an officer of the staff coming all the way from Spa to do the job!"

"We'll see about that!" the officer retorted, but Elton saw that his foeman had lost his cold assurance of a moment before. "I've had no word of anyone coming from Spa."

"Since when, Herr Leutnant," Elton snapped, "did the Imperial staff find it necessary to consult you!"

"Nevertheless, you'll stand exactly where you are and let me examine your orders, Herr Oberleutnant!"

"Now why didn't you suggest that in the first place instead of making an ass of yourself! You're a reservist—of limited service, I take it!"

"I've had service enough to follow my instructions!" the officer muttered, stung by the arrogant contempt of the officer from Spa.

Elton reached leisurely into his pocket and brought out his counterfeit credentials. He knew that, even if this man passed them, the matter would have to be settled at headquarters of the Coblenz garrison. But his face registered no hint of the grim resolve that leaped through his brain—that it was now this man's life or his own.

In that brief off-guard moment that the German's hand was extended to accept the Imperial orders, Elton seized the advantage of surprise attack and leaped to the grapple. With both hands he seized the other's right wrist, the momentum of his drive carrying the two men crashing into a shelf of bottles which collapsed with a jangling crash of splintering glass. The Luger was discharged as Elton, exerting the full pressure of his powerful hands, broke the other's grip.

The German, in the same instant, shook himself free of the grapple. With a vicious kick of his heavy boot he scored a blow that drove Elton off balance and gave the German a momentary advantage which he used to snatch a knife from his pocket. The touch of a spring snapped a long, thin blade into the conflict. Elton leaped back as the other swung the knife in front of him in murderous thrusts.

Only by leaping behind a wine cask did Elton escape the onslaught. But in the same movement his hands gripped the wooden mallet and he leaped back into range. Elton's advantage was that of full possession of his wits. Against the maddened fury of the man with the knife he swung his own weapon with cool, swift calculation, a terrific blow that drove the German to the floor in a groaning huddle, where he floundered in the muddle of wine and glass.

There came the pounding of excited feet on the floor above. Elton dropped the mallet and turned to the stairway. He reached the landing as a group of excited soldiers gathered in Frau Fenstermacher's kitchen. They were partly dressed, faces gaping excited bewilderment.

"Call headquarters to send a detachment here at once to investigate!" Elton commanded coolly.

His words of command shaped their thoughts. Two soldiers rushed from the room to get their uniforms. But Frau Fenstermacher stood there with an incredulous look brewing in her placid face. She had seen that second officer go down into the cellar. She was opening her mouth to speak when Elton took the words from her lips.

"You will remain here in your kitchen, Frau Fenstermacher," he ordered. "See to it that no one but soldiers in uniform, or the secret police, enter your cellar!"

He turned sharply on his heel and strode out of the house. Reaching the street he broke into a run, using the German military gait for double-time. Reaching the cab in the Schlossplatz he sprang inside.

"Drive across the bridge and to Glockenburg!" he told the driver. "I've got to be there in not more than ten minutes."

As the car got under way Elton saw that a soldier had come out of the German billet and was staring after him. From this he guessed that the alarm would not be long in spreading. In a whispered exchange with the French pilot he found the precise location of the hidden plane and from time to time, with the Frenchman's aid, transmitted instructions on the route.

The way led past Glockenburg up a long rise, thence through tortuous country lanes to an abandoned German farm that lay back of the crest that overlooked the Rhine. The motor-cab, an ancient contraption, wheezed and jolted. Elton knew that a German staff car, once the Coblenz garrison took up the pursuit, would cover the road in a fraction of the time.

As they came to their destination of a ramshackle barn, Elton looked about with puzzled eyes. Except for a few oak trees the place was devoid of forest or hiding place for a plane. Then as the Frenchman nodded at the barn, with a significant smile, Elton groaned. Long minutes would be wasted wheeling the Frenchman's machine out of that place, minutes that might spell disaster from that German hornets' swarm now inevitably forming behind them.

As the motor-cab came to a stop at their destination, Elton reached forward and twisted the driver's arms behind his back, strapped them there with his waist belt and placed two hundred marks in the fellow's pocket.

The Frenchman ran to the barn. His preparations for such a moment as this had been thorough. Manipulation of a few leathern hinges released one whole end of the building; a few minutes of hurried work removed a cushion of old

hay that had covered the plane from casual view. The pilot's eyes were dancing as he brought three Mauser rifles from hiding and gave them to Elton.

"Five minutes it will take me, *monsieur*, to have my plane ready for the air!" he exclaimed. "But the roar of the motor will bring the whole garrison of Coblenz on us! Please, if you will cover the road, three muskets will hold them in check until the plane is ready!"

CHAPTER VI

THE KAISER'S NEW AGENT

THEY got the propeller to whirling; then Elton ran to the crest of the hill. A hurried survey of the terrain gave him an ideal position from which to cover the road with rifle fire. The crest, at that point, ran in a series of long undulations down to the flat terrain along the shore of the Rhine. Elton saw that he had a clear field of fire for a distance of three hundred yards in the direction of the river and for the full range of the Mauser on both flanks.

For a minute the plane roared fitfully, then settled down into a sweet drone. Unless the pursuit had gathered his trail, the whole time required for warming the engines for the take-off might elapse without conflict, Elton estimated. But before another minute had passed he caught the flash of sunlight on the polished gray side of a German military car. It was threading its way at a reckless speed up the twisting road of the rugged slope.

He lay down upon the slope of a ground welt on the crest. Two of the Mausers lay on his right side, sights set at four hundred meters. Five hundred rounds of fresh ammunition he had laid out in clips handy for use in a protracted siege. Dropping the muzzle of a Mauser into line, he took careful aim at the German car. Since the range was set at four hundred meters he drew a very fine sight and fired.

His first shot had no visible effect. The car did not slow down in its jolting forward course. He fired a second and third time, aiming at the right front of the car. The vehicle careened wildly at his fifth shot and left the road. Elton judged that he had hit the driver.

Four men piled out of the car, three armed with rifles, and ran to cover. Elton knew that he now faced mortal combat—three riflemen and doubtless an officer with a Luger. But he knew that he held the advantage of position. Not without heavy reenforcement could those four soldiers force the crest against the power of his three rifles.

He held his fire until he had a human target. But the Germans were not slow in showing themselves. The roar of French motors must have warned the officer in command that they had no time to lose, that additional forces would come rushing up from Coblenz without the need of summons.

They resorted to battle tactics, each man simulating a squad and tearing forward a dozen paces, twisting and turning to reduce his vulnerability. While one man ran the others poured rifle fire in the direction of their unseen enemy.

Elton lay close to the ground, aiming with extreme care, following the zig-zagging figures with the end of his sight and pressing the last infinitesimal fraction of his trigger-pull only when satisfied with his aim. No sooner would one man end his rush than another would tear upwards, covered by the supporting fire of his comrades. Elton emptied his Mauser without a hit and coolly reloaded, intent on saving the other two loaded Mausers for the emergency of closer quarters.

His second shot out of the fresh clip took a target, a squat soldier who spun around and plunged head foremost on his face. The remaining two riflemen did

not hesitate. They came driving on. Elton could hear the barking commands of their leader, who was crawling up on his belly, keeping himself guarded by irregularities of the ground, intermittently raising his hand to send an impotent Luger bullet up at the crest.

Elton was pressing the trigger on another wiggling target when his eye caught sight of the inevitable reenforcements. A light truck was jolting up the crooked road, its sides bristling with rifles. He swung his muzzle against the truck and emptied the magazine, intent on forcing them to deploy. One soldier pitched out of the truck in the throes of death, the others scurried out and flung themselves to the ground.

Twenty there were in that truck. In a minute they would begin their advance by rushes up the slope. The men in front of him hugged the earth, waiting for the new skirmish line to extend itself. Hazily he saw a second and third truck coming in the distance. It was only a matter of minutes now until the Germans would have force enough to overdry dirt. The new commander had located him and centered the covering fire, then tried new tactics. Two squads rose, one at each end of the skirmish line, and advanced simultaneously while the men in the center poured hot lead.

Elton, only the top of his head lightly exposed, fired back as rapidly as he could feed shells from magazine to breech. The range was down to a hundred meters and he used battle sights. Two of the Mausers he emptied before the two squads dropped to cover, sans three grenadiers. The center squad was up and forward. Elton emptied the third Mauser, then reloaded one weapon and resumed the fire.

He glanced at his watch, knowing that he could not hold on much longer. The roar of those telltale motors told the German commanders that there was no time to lose in stealth, that they must pay the price in lives for the shortest, quickest route to the crest of that hill. Elton emptied the rifle in slow fire, then backed slowly away from the crest. Springing to his feet he ran to the plane

whelm him, no matter how rapidly or accurately he fought.

At the first rush of the new line up the hill Elton resumed firing, still picking his men with cool aim. Of five men advancing he dropped two before the detachment took cover. Another squad rose instantly. A bullet clipped close to Elton's head, another showered him with

and climbed into the rear cockpit.

The Frenchman was casually observing his motors, evidently unconscious of the desperate situation behind him, since the motors had drowned all sounds of musketry. Elton shook the pilot and motioned vigorously. As the first Germans reached the crest, the pilot set the plane rolling.

Five shots more Elton drove back as the plane swirled down a wide level bench, then dropped into the cockpit. With a run of nearly a thousand meters favoring him, the Frenchman took off gracefully and shot out over the Rhine. A spurt of smoke close by, then another, warned them that the anti-aircraft guns had been manned in readiness. The pilot changed course. In less than a minute Coblenz lay back in the distance.

Elton consulted his watch again and smiled grim satisfaction. The hour was short of six o'clock yet, which meant they would be in Paris in time for early breakfast. But breakfast was not bothering Elton just now. The Imperial secret service would not be slow in guessing how they'd been tricked; the alarm might even now be on its way to Volgatt in Paris.

Lolling back in the cockpit, Elton took the report from Berlin from its oilskin covering and sketched through it. The Kaiser's marshals were planning to shorten their lines on the Western front and dig in for the winter. German manpower would not permit of further offensives, until new levies of raw men had been drafted and trained.

Suddenly his eyes centered, he read and re-read avidly the last pages of the report. But one massed attack was planned for the final months of the fall. The staffs at Spa were now working out the tactical plans. That attack was to be a punitive assault directed against the American first army. Its purpose was to shake American morale and cool the hot fighting spirit of the American regiments after their success at St. Mihiel; also to brew a protest in America against massing men in battle before they had been put through longer months of training.

AT ELTON'S insistence, the plane put down at Orlay. Elton hurried to the American commanding officer's quarters and telephoned D'Auteuil to meet him at the Frenchman's secret billet with Colonel l'Ourcq. An American car sped there while the pilot took his plane to report to the Paris squadrons.

D'Auteuil, tense and ill at ease, was waiting at the curb when Elton rolled up. He held a warning finger to his lips.

"If you please, my Captain," he warned, "I've told nothing to Colonel l'Ourcq. Therefore I implore that you speak with great discretion."

The French espionage chieftain, fat, suave, in outward appearance an affable, mild person who might have been mistaken for a wine merchant, was shaken out of his politeness a moment later when Elton handed him the intercepted report from Berlin. He glanced through it, a violent ague assailing his fingers as he caught its importance.

"*Bien*, Captain Elton!" he exclaimed, turning first this way and then the other in search of his cap and stick as he made for the door. "My automobile—my cap —my stick!" he commanded, and bolted through the door en route to French headquarters.

"You're armed, of course," Elton said to D'Auteuil, starting outside.

"But yes, my Captain, always," said D'Auteuil. "But if there is a question of danger, shall I have some of my men follow us?"

"I'd rather not, *monsieur*, and we'll have no need for our own pistols if a little job of house-breaking in broad daylight succeeds."

They left in the Deuxième Bureau's camouflaged taxicab, driving to the vicinity of Volgatt's billet on Rue Lacrosse. Elton maneuvered to the rear of the place and found Yvonne's window. Luckily Yvonne had arisen and the room was empty. The two went quietly through, Elton leading the way into the room whence Volgatt had appeared.

There were two rooms leading off this room, the doors closed. Making a deduction, Elton went to the door of the

room nearest the open street and tapped lightly.

"What is it you want?" a voice demanded in French.

"An important message, Monsieur Lafitte," Elton replied.

"A message for whom?" the other asked fretfully.

"For M-47, *monsieur*."

"I don't understand you—any messages should be delivered in my shop as I am ill and must not be disturbed."

"I am just arrived from Coblenz, Herr Volgatt, and can't bother with subordinates," Elton shot back. "This is a very urgent piece of business and can't wait on your formalities."

There was a moment's tense silence, then the clank of a lock. As the door opened a fraction of an inch, Elton threw his full weight against it and bolted inside with drawn Luger.

"Drop it!" Elton snapped as Volgatt half raised the pistol in his hand.

The German agent hesitated, at the verge of a desperate test of violence, then yielded to Elton's cool gaze and leveled gun. D'Auteuil seized the fellow's pistol.

Elton stripped the beard from Volgatt's face and while D'Auteuil bound the prisoner's hands and legs, carefully effaced the fellow's disguise with a wet cloth.

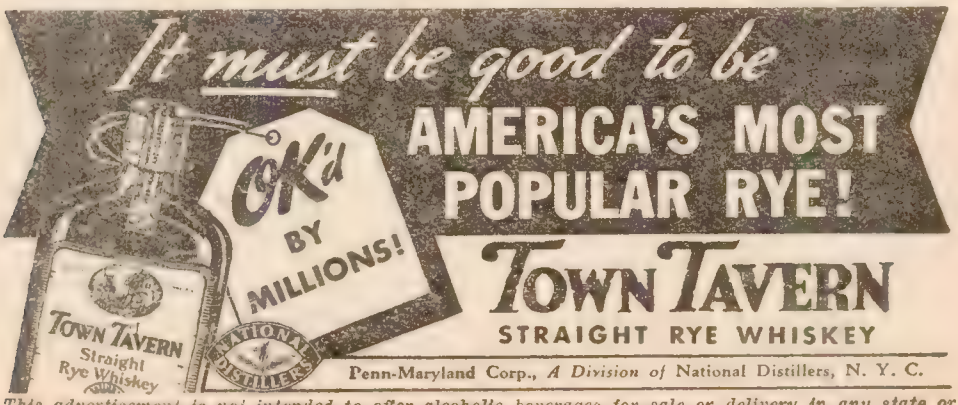
"I'm not giving you a bath, Volgatt," he chuckled. "I merely want to study your pigmentation—as I intend to use it myself for a few days or possibly longer. When you did away with that old Frenchman from Châlons and disguised yourself as an invalid you overlooked one very interesting possibility."

Volgatt made no response. He had retreated into the stoical acceptance of the trapped spy. Death, he must have seen, was the inevitable fruit of this morning's adventure. His face was grave but unafraid, his manner that of complete self-possession. Elton examined a clothes closet and found a silk dressing gown which he tore into long strips.

"I want this prisoner securely bound and gagged, *monsieur*," he instructed D'Auteuil. "We've got to do rather a scientific job of it as I intend to keep him in that closet here until tonight, when I can smuggle him out a window to you to the Bureau."

"But, my Captain," said D'Auteuil, "in just a minute I can have some gendarmes here to take the scoundrel!"

"I don't think we'd better take any chances exposing our advantage, *monsieur*," Elton said with an easy smile. "If you don't mind, I intend to borrow Herr Volgatt's masquerade and sit in on the game for the time being. In addition to picking up Volgatt's organization at the proper time, I'd like to keep the Imperial general staff at Spa supplied with military information from Paris—at least until the German army has all the data it needs for the fall campaigns."



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ON THE PROD

the life story of a Texas bad man

by CLYDE WANTLAND

Second of three parts

(*The story so far*)

"WHY did you shoot Theo Brown, your playmate?"

"He dared me to."

"But why did you shoot to hit him?"

"Hell, that's what you shoot for, ain't it—to hit? Damn a feller that shoots to miss!"

Then and there, facing his first judge and jury, fourteen-year-old Ben Thompson outlined the code that was to make of him the rowdiest, flashiest, possibly the most ruthless killer that even blasted a way into the crimson history of the border states.

They sent him to the penitentiary that time, but he was released within a year, and went to Austin, where, in September, 1858, he stood off a Comanche raid single-handed, killing five and holding Packsaddle Pass until help arrived from the city. This, the last Indian raid into Austin, stamped Ben Thompson in heroic mold, even among people who had been his enemies. But within a year he was to make their gloomiest predictions come true.

After a notorious knife duel in New Orleans, he enlisted with Colonel Baylor's regiment at the outbreak of the Civil War. Before the outfit had reached its first objective, trouble struck, with Thompson at the bottom. In a dispute

over military funds, he killed two officers and ended his first enlistment a fugitive from the flag he had sworn to defend.

The next three years were crowded indeed. He married in Austin, joined the famous Colonel John S. (Old Rip) Ford's rangers, stayed with them long enough to become a hunted man on both sides of the Rio Grande, led a notorious band of renegades, stopped them from raiding a Confederate customs house—and capped red months of border raiding by a blazing gun battle over a faro game in Laredo, which ended with two men dead and a city looking for his blood.

He had hit the border at its wildest, had set it aflame, had made a name for himself that is still a tradition and departed, all within two months. But more was yet to come. Ben Thompson, forking a stolen mule, was headed for Corpus Christi, in search of new excitement.

CHAPTER IV

JOHN COOMBS

CAPTAIN Benavides gave Ben Thompson his undivided attention and sought him so industriously that none of the other company commanders along the coast would permit Ben to join up with their outfits. Once, when he stopped with Captain Donaldson's troop, a pitched battle was narrowly averted when Benavides demanded the troop surrender Ben; another time Captain Gardner actually unlimbered his artillery and fired point-blank into the Benavides troops who came to get Ben.

After that Ben was unwelcome in any troop. Benavides was out to avenge the death of his favorite officer and sergeant; he was serving under Texas and had the necessary power to make it very uncomfortable for Thompson.

After skirmishing around the coast country for three months, Ben returned to Austin. A few days after his arrival his wife presented him with a son.

Through the intervention of powerful friends, Ben now concluded a truce with Colonel Ford and had dismissed Old Rip's charges against him for striking Captain Ware.

Then Old Rip showed his admiration for the fighting Ben by giving him a captain's commission and authorizing him to raise his own company for depredatory service against the Federal wagon trains handling the enormous traffic between St. Louis and Santa Fé. This assignment was cut out for Ben Thompson; at once he made the rounds of Austin, enlisting picked men for his outfit.

This brought about a strange issue. Austin did not know what to do with Ben Thompson. Should he be made a hero or a prisoner? The city was then under martial law with a company of Home Guard "heel flies" in charge; to these Ben was an outlaw. They said he was raising a band of outlaws; they said other and worse things. A showdown between Ben and the home guards was inevitable.

It came one evening when a group of guards cornered John Rapp, a Thompson lieutenant, in Wahrenberger's saloon, just above the post office. A score of the home guards, under the leadership of John Coombs, were rampaging, drinking heavily, and out to get the Thompson men.

Coombs made a gun play at Rapp; Rapp grabbed the gun, got his hand caught when the trigger snapped, and Coombs tore his thumb off. Rapp, however, escaped and went to the home of his chief, Ben Thompson.

Ben appears to have been staying close around the house with his wife and young son. At any rate he was not prepared for battle that night.

"They dare you to come out," Rapp reported.

"Nothing will do them but a fight?" asked Ben casually.

"Nothing but a fight. They plan to gang you if you'll come out."

"All right," said Ben, "I'll come." Then he asked his wife to bring his gun.

"You haven't got a load in it," she replied.

"Then I'll get me a round," he said. He took the gun, hunted up the gunsmith, George Todd, who quickly hammered out five loads. Within a half hour Ben was on his way.

Ben located the home guards in an alley by Miller's livery stable. He and Rapp approached within thirty paces and Ben called out:

"This the crowd that wanted a battle?"

"Yes," came the chorus.

"Which one's your leader?"

"I am," said John Coombs.

"All right," said Ben, "get set!"

"We're ready," said Coombs, his head sticking around the corner. Ben fired and Coombs dropped with a bullet through his head.

He ran to the entrance of the alley, fired twice at the fleeing men and then went home. He got a man with each shot but they later recovered.

"How'd you come out, honey?" asked his charming wife.

"I'm pretty sure I got the one that called himself the leader; I could see his head by the light in front of the livery stable. Afraid I wasted two more shots, though; the alley was too dark."

A friend arrived presently to warn Ben that a mob was forming up-town to lynch him; he gave his gun to his wife and asked her to find gunsmith Todd and have it reloaded; then he took to the brush and had to hide out all night, as his wife had trouble locating Todd.

The next morning, with five new loads in his revolver, Ben was the easiest of all men to locate; he strode up and down Capitol Avenue, inquiring along the way who it was that wanted to lynch him or see him. This was a typical Thompsonian gesture and the citizens kept well to cover. Ben was on the prod and dangerous.

Finally, with a number of slugs of bad whisky under his belt, he strode over and entered the office of the provost marshal, found that gentleman flanked by a dozen guards, and buttressed by the city marshal with two deputies.

"Anybody here want Ben Thompson?" he asked.

"We have a warrant for your arrest," stammered the city marshal.

"A warrant, huh?"

"Yes, Ben—why don't you give up?"

"No."

That ended the matter for the time being. Ben took in the town all day. The next day he sobered up, went back to the marshal's office and agreed to surrender, provided he be permitted to sign his own bond pending trial. This was gladly accepted.

Ben continued then to recruit his company without interference. But the outfit got no farther than Waco when the war was over. The company disbanded and Ben returned to Austin, where he stood trial for killing Coombs and was acquitted.

THE war over, the Federal government clamped martial law down on hard-boiled Texas and sent hard-boiled cavalry to take command. Colonel Badger, commanding the First Louisiana regiment, was assigned to Austin. He arrived with his outfit in Austin on June 2, 1865, and the following morning sent out a platoon to Ben Thompson's home and placed Austin's most noted citizen under arrest on general principles.

Evidently Colonel Badger had heard quite a bit about his prisoner, because he placed him in a solitary cell, chained him by both ankles and wrists and placed a double guard around him.

These gentle precautions were calculated to hold even Ben Thompson in jail, so the colonel went seeking some

charge on which he could kill this public nuisance and restore the peace. While he was thus engaged a messenger arrived secretly from Mexico with $10,000 in gold with which to secure the services of Ben Thompson to fight on the side of Maximilian.

At that time $10,000 hard gold had as much influence as it does now. Within a week Ben's guards had been bribed, and one night he and the four stole out to waiting horses and by daylight were well on their way to San Antonio, thence to Brownsville and Matamoros.

By the time Colonel Badger was ready to file charges and execute his notorious prisoner, that individual was located in Matamoros, a lieutenant in Captain Frank Mullins' guerrilla company, waging war for Maximilian.

During the Civil War in the United States the enormous traffic in cotton had mushroomed Matamoros to a boom town of 75,000 persons of virtually every type that might be found on the tempestuous border, and Brownsville, on the Texas side of the river, to another boom town of half that size.

General Mejia, Maximilian military chieftain, was in command of Matamoros; General Cortinas, the Red Terror, was *presidente municipal,* or first mayor.

The Miramon forces had Matamoros sewed up, an overwhelming number laying siege with nothing to break the monotony except daily sorties of little consequence.

Lieutenant Thompson, of course, soon tired of this. He had gone to considerable trouble to get to this fight and here was nothing more than little skirmishes, street brawls and gambling house killings, which were nothing new to him.

So he prevailed on the general to permit him to try to break through the lines with fifty selected men and do a little depredating out along the Monterrey road. He got the permission, crossed to the Texas side, went up the river ten miles, crossed back, and struck a wagon train the following day—a capital prize of eighty wagons, mule-powered, loaded with all sorts of valuable provisions and merchandise.

The guards were soundly licked in a short, sanguinary engagement, the entire *entrada* captured. Under the rules of warfare the prize should have been delivered to his superior officers; but Lieutenant Ben Thompson took it all over to Texas, appointed John Mason his agent to sell it at the best price and deposit the proceeds to Ben's credit with John Twohig, San Antonio banker.

This high-handed act riled the Red Terror, Cortinas. This was *his* game. He set his policemen to the task of getting even with this upstart lieutenant.

Two nights later Ben, with Captain Gilly, was taking in the sights of Matamoros, and wandered quite a distance away from his headquarters. While emerging from a gambling den near the Market Plaza, a dozen or so policemen threw down on the two.

The *capitan,* Sixto Garcia, covered Ben, ordered him to throw up his hands while his men disarmed the turbulant *Americano.* Some reports say the captain spat in Ben's face—others say he was unnecessarily harsh and jabbed Ben in the face with the muzzle of his gun. Whatever he did, at any rate, was the wrong thing.

Ben's deadly gun leaped from its holster, spouting fire. Captain Garcia fell dead; a policeman at his side fell dead; the detail broke for cover. Ben saved his shots and backed into a protecting doorway.

One of Ben's soldiers saw the fight from a distance, and believed that his chief had fallen. He took a short cut across the plaza to the Americans' camp and spread the alarm.

"The police have killed Ben," he yelled down the company street. "The police killed Ben at the Market House."

The imported fighters had not been

getting along any too well with the local authorities ever since they had been quartered in Matamoros; there were the inevitable rivalries, jealousies, animosities—and then these wild Texans were no doubt lying awake that night praying for a fight to turn up.

At any rate, they tumbled from their bunks; without stopping to pull on trousers they grabbed their murderous rifles, and with shirt tails streaming, started out to clean up the local police force.

Ben was the only one that could stop them; at the end of a half hour he convinced them he was alive and that there was no point in continuing the slaughter. So he quieted them down and got them back in their quarters, but not until a total of sixteen of Cortinas' picked policemen had been killed, including the two killed by Ben.

The following morning General Mejia summoned the soldier who had spread the erroneous alarm and ordered him confined for thirty days. This was the only official action taken against any one. The general was a diplomat.

The fortunes of war, however, now swung violently away from Maximilian; General Mejia was ordered to meet the emperor at Queretaro, to abdicate Matamoros.

Volunteers were called for to go with Mejia; Ben Thompson and seven hundred and sixty others volunteered. At the end of six months Maximilian had fallen, the French troops were withdrawn, and Ben Thompson was in the Sisters of Charity Hospital in Vera Cruz, fighting for his life against yellow fever.

When able to leave the hospital the following spring he learned that Texas was now under a civil government headed by Governor Throckmorton, so Ben made his way back to Austin, his iron constitution almost broken, his money gone, his future uncertain. He was now thirty-two years of age.

THE reports that Texas was now under civil government proved to be only partially correct. Federal troops, lots of them, still retained command of the situation. Austin was under guard day and night; no one could come or go without a military pass.

A guard patrol on the southern edge of Austin halted one night a man that appeared to be a Mexican *caballero,* gaudily attired, well mounted.

"Halt! Who's there?" challenged the guard.

"Who's there yourself?" came back in good English.

"A Federal patrol—"

"—Then go to hell, you so-and-so Yankee—"

"Damned if it ain't Ben Thompson," said a sergeant who had been in Austin quite a while. "Take him in, boys."

But Ben wheeled his horse and made a getaway in the brush. For several weeks he remained in hiding at the home of his wife's father, resting up and recuperating.

Through the intervention of friends he was about to make his peace with the military and return to his home when his brother Billy killed a Federal sergeant, Andy Burke, in a brawl on the edge of town. This proved very unfortunate, as it again focused attention on the turbulant Thompsons and set the entire military machine on their trail.

Billy, aided by his brother, escaped to the Indian Territory, but Ben refused to leave the vicinity. Finally one day he began drinking heavily, came boldly into Austin, shot up the town, intimidated a judge, landed in the military bull pen with a hundred pounds of irons chained to him.

He was court-martialed on the following charges:

No. 1—Assault with intent to kill. Specification: "In this that he, Benjamin Thompson, civilian, in the city of Austin, on or about September 2,

1868, did feloniously, wickedly, shoot at with a pistol, one Theophilus Brown, civilian."

No. 2—Threat to kill. Specification: "In this that he, Benjamin Brown, civilian, did, on September 2, 1868, go to the office of W. D. Scott, Justice of the Peace and did threaten his life in words as follows: 'You damned old buzzard, if you try to have me arrested again I'll kill you and every one who has anything to do with it'."

At the conclusion of a trial lasting eight weeks Ben was found guilty and sentenced to four years at hard labor in the Texas penitentiary at Huntsville.

He served two years and was pardoned when the civil authorities were re-established. As a juvenile he served a term for hitting Theo Brown; now he served a term for missing him. Theo was bad luck.

CHAPTER V

SHERIFF WHITNEY

ON his release from the penitentiary, Ben learned of a new business that had sprung up in Texas. Cattle were being driven up the trail to Kansas and sold for actual gold! Ben, knowing Texans, figured that up at the end of the trail was where the Texas boys would spend a lot of this gold and do some gambling; so he set out from Austin for Abilene, Kansas.

Fortune was quite a while smiling on him in Abilene. He borrowed money from Texans and lost it; he could get no breaks in the games, until, as the story goes, he pawned his six-shooter for five dollars and with this modest sum grandly made a monte lay-out on the street.

Inasmuch as this is a Ben Thompson story, we will accept the version told by his friends of what now happened. Ben was winning against all comers; the game was going fine when a slim, long-haired, picturesque man with a star on his lapel came up.

"You can't run that game here, cowboy," he said. "Pick up that blanket and layout and git goin'."

Ben hesitated, bewildered. Here was a challenge. Then he remembered his gun was pawned. He smiled grimly; the tall man kicked the layout to one side side and passed on.

"Who was that?" Ben asked.

"That? Why, that's Wild Bill Hickok, the city marshal. What he says goes."

The fact that Ben was unarmed, no doubt, robbed history of one of its greatest thrills. Here was the best of all the Texas fighters face to face with the pride of the plains country; here were undoubtedly the two fastest gun throwers—the champions of champions. . . .

Ben, his friends say, went promptly and got his gun out of hock. Certainly, within an hour he had his game going again, although he now spread it inside a building.

When luck smiled on Ben she seems to have really laughed out loud; he invariably made huge winnings quickly, invariably made huge losses with equal celerity when the turn came.

Just now he won $2,500 before midnight. The Texas cow hands and herd owners liked to buck a monte game dealt by one of their kind. And, before the game was shut up, there drifted in Phil Coe, a friend of Ben's—a character in his own right; and Phil now had more than $10,000 on him.

He suggested that he and Ben open a saloon. Certainly, he argued, they would soon have the bulk of the Texas trade. So the deal was struck and the next morning the Bull's Head Saloon was opened—Ben Thompson's answer to Wild Bill Hickok.

The Bull's Head made money unbelieveably fast; so fast, in fact, that within a month Ben decided here was his fu-

ture. He sent for his wife and child to join him.

Not only did the Texas boys patronize the Bull's Head—hundreds of others drank there on the chance they would see the battle of the century when Ben Thompson and Wild Bill Hickok swapped lead. There were already bets on both sides; every man from Texas would bet his shirt on Ben and Wild Bill had his admirers and backers.

Enemies of Wild Bill said he was protecting thievery and robbery in Abilene; Texans reported being robbed right under his nose. But, when Ben Thompson opened his place, there was their friend! Whatever else might be his faults, no one ever accused Ben Thompson of not being a square shooter. First and foremost he permitted no women in his place. The boys had to go elsewhere for that.

And Ben permitted no "rolling" or robbing in his place. The boys could get as drunk as they cared to, knowing Ben would see they were protected. In fact, Ben ran his place without outside interference and needed no protection from Wild Bill and the law.

But Wild Bill came in frequently; here was a magnet that drew him irresistibly; the showdown would come now any day.

Then Ben's wife and child arrived. Ben met them in a buggy at the station. While driving back to town, the team became frightened, got out of control, upset the buggy, broke Ben's right leg; broke two of his wife's ribs, the boy's arm.

Ben left with his battered family that night for Kansas City for treatment. At the end of three months he started with them for Austin. In the baggage coach of the train he noticed an unusually long coffin, tagged also for Austin.

"Who's body is that?" he asked.

"That's Phil Coe's," said the trainman. "He was a saloon keeper at Abilene and got in Wild Bill Hickok's way night before last."

So Ben rode to Texas on the same train that carried the body of his partner, killed by the man that Ben now vowed would have to swap out with him when they met. But just now he couldn't turn back; his family were still in a precarious condition. He came to Austin and it was three months more before he was ready to return to Kansas.

When the injuries of his family had healed sufficiently to permit Ben's return to Abilene, his own health broke down. His hard life had taken a heavy toll; the once iron man had become only a shadow of his former self. He was forced to go into the hills near Austin for a long period of rest and it was the following spring before he was able to travel.

With barely enough money to buy a ticket and load up his old revolver, Ben set out for Abilene—and Wild Bill Hickok. But by this time Wild Bill had drifted on the Black Hills and had met the fate he had dealt to so many others. Wild Bill had died in front of a spouting gun, died the orthodox, ordained death of the gun-thrower.

The Bull's Head saloon was dismantled. Ben found out that Wild Bill and his bunch, after killing Coe, had trumped up various charges, fines, assessments, etc., against the once prosperous saloon and had run it for several months, after which it was closed and abandoned.

Abilene was now only a memory of its former grandeur. In the first place, trail driving was going into an eclipse. The native Kansans and residents of Oklahoma were up in arms against the rowdy Texans and their vast herds of longhorns. The legislatures were passing laws that made it impossible to drive herds along the old routes, that made it next to impossible to drive them anywhere.

There was a boycott against Texans. The boys from Kansas and Oklahoma were rowdy, yes. They drank hard liquor, gambled, killed when occasion demanded. But they were as babes in arms to the

amber-squirting cowhands that came up from the Lone Star State—the rowdiest, shootingest, gamblingest bunch that ever shot up a town in the Old West.

Kansas particularly was up in arms against these Texas bad men; and Texans banded together to retaliate. Kansas charged them with all sorts of terrorism and crimes; they retaliated with charges that they had plenty of money, spent it, and then when drunk, were robbed by Kansas gangsters posing as officers. They pointed to Wild Bill as the organizer of this underhand racket.

Trail driving was dying, but was not dead. However, Abilene was in the discard, and the scene had shifted temporarily to Ellsworth. To this new capital of longhorns, crime, gambling, rowdyism, Ben Thompson now turned his attention.

ELLSWORTH was at this time almost an armed camp; the boycott against the Texans was in full swing. The natives had a police force of twenty picked men; most of the streets were barred to Texans, the Lone Star men being corralled in the Grand Central Hotel and its immediate vicinity. A left-handed welcome was published in the Ellsworth *Banner*, undersigned by Mayor Miller. It read:

> "The entire population of Ellsworth has been in favor of the cattle trade from Texas. Drovers have been invited and welcomed here, and every week brings additions to their numbers . . . and they are welcome if they submit to the laws of the land . . . but a few desperadoes have found their way in . . . if they conspire against the order and peace of our ordinances they will need to make their stay short . . ."

This notice was printed the week after Ben Thompson arrived, but Ben did not take the hint.

The following week Ben's bad brother, Billy, arrived as a cow hand with a herd belonging to Cad "Old Shanghai" Pierce.

Ben hocked his diamond stud for $800, his ornate gold watch and chain for $300, and, with money borrowed from friends, opened a gambling hall over in the prohibited area.

When Old Shanghai Pierce sold his herd, he wanted to buck a first rate monte game, and, of course, sought out Ben's; but when Old Shanghai gambled, he gambled.

Neill Cain, dealing for Ben, saw at once that their limited bank could not handle Shanghai's heavy bets. So Neill sought out Ben.

"See if you can find a local gambler that'll take our over bets on Shanghai," he told the boss. "We can't handle more'n half of them."

Ben hurried outside and located Bill Martin, well heeled local gambler, and offered him the cut on the bank. Bill took it, covered Shanghai to the sky, cutting in on the bank under the old rules of the gambling fraternity that the joint bankers would share equally both losses and winnings.

The setting lasted all night and until noon the next day when the old Texas cow man grew tired and quit, about $3,000 loser.

Throughout the play Bill Martin had been drinking heavily, sauntering in and out of Ben's place—and finally made a drunken plan to keep all the winnings.

Before Neill Cain had cleaned the money off the table, Bill Martin marched in with a dozen armed followers, threw down on the dealer and swept up all the money.

Ben was in another room and was taken completely by surprise. When told of the raid, Ben walked outside and met Bill in his bunch.

"Bill," he said, "you know under the gambling rules, you're entitled to only one half."

"But I took it all," Bill shot back, "and plan to keep it."

"The hell you will," said the Texas terror, his black eyes flashing fire, his enormous head thrust forward. The Texas boys knew their bad man was now on the prod and hell was due to pop.

"All right," said Bill Martin with a sneer, "mebbeso some of you tough *hombres* from Texas can come and take it. But when you come, come ready for a scrap."

"I'll be right with you, *pronto*," said the Texas ace killer and stepped back inside, going directly to his room in the rear.

Ben Thompson realized what he was going up against — a whole community. Ordinarily, when rigged out for battle, he carried only one six-shooter and his Bowie knife. Now, however, he carried his knife, a six-shooter on each hip, while he trailed at the alert position a sixteen-shot Henry rifle—the longest range, heaviest shooting, most deadly weapon then to be found on the entire border.

Only one person would follow Ben outside -and that was his brother, Billy, who was armed with a sawed-off shotgun and one six-shooter.

Ellsworth was ready; in fact the citizenry leaped to arms so quickly as to give credence to later rumors that this whole deal was planned to wipe out the Texans. But, if that was the plan, it was made without taking into account the caliber of the widow Thompson's sons.

In all of his checkered career, Ben Thompson never showed to better advantage as an absolutely fearless, cool, methodical killer than he did this day when he stepped outside into the main street of Ellsworth, bellowing his rage, cursing his adversaries, facing what seemed to be an almost certain death.

Bill Martin and his crew of so-called killers evaporated into thin air at the sound of the blood-curdling war whoop of the wild man from Texas. Ben got a shot on the wing at one of the Martin henchmen, but missed.

Ben and his brother Billy took the middle of the wide street, blasting away at vacant windows, splitting the air with their gobbling war whoop—

"Come on out, you damned Jayhawker dogies—let's have a battle," Ben invited.

Presently his adversaries appeared.

From a far corner, some four hundred yards away, emerged a half dozen possemen led by Happy Jack, trained with Wild Bill, now a deputy sheriff at Ellsworth and no slouch.

Ben calmly squatted in the road, the Henry rifle roared—the ball buried itself in a door jamb six inches above the head of Happy Jack. Ben squinted down the long barrel a second time; the Henry spurted flame; Happy Jack's hat was plastered on the wall.

"Damn such shootin'," growled Ben,

who had never been as good with a rifle as he was at close quarters with a six-shooter.

Happy Jack and his crew flew for cover.

Ben and his brother continued their advance down the street. Coming in front of Brennan's saloon, Ben burst inside. This was the headquarters of the natives. Ben found the place deserted, so he splintered the big back bar with a ball and continued.

Over to the left appeared Ed Hogue, another deputy sheriff, with three city policemen and a small posse.

Ed Hogue was exposed and Ben got a good shot at him—and missed. Until his dying day Ben apologized for his atrocious shooting on this occasion; but he was not getting any shots closer than two hundred yards, and he was not accustomed to his new Henry rifle.

Almost directly in front of the Grand Central Hotel was a miniature plaza, or park, in the center of which was the little fire engine which had been bought some months before when the cattle trade from Texas brought along the boom.

Posses were now closing in on four sides. There was no way to turn, even had Ben Thompson wanted to do so.

"We'll make our stand on that fire engine," Ben said.

Death seemed inevitable. There would be no quarter asked, none given. The Texans were watching from a safe distance; only Billy was sticking. And now Billy, himself accounted a bad man, wavered—and broke.

"I'm quitting, Ben," he said. "I'm going to run for it."

Ben looked at his brother, pityingly. He was not angry, did not abuse him. This was a tough spot and Ben had patience with those who could not face the music.

"All right, Billy," Ben said. "There's a horse on that picket line. Mount him and go back. I'll cover your flight best I can."

Billy shook hands with his grim brother.

"Good-by," said Billy.

"*Vaya con Dios,*" said Ben casually as Billy mounted, rowelled his horse and sped back down the street to safety.

Then Ben took his exposed position on the fire engine in the center of the little park and calmly waited while the posses closed in from every quarter, came in closer, like a pack at the kill.

BEN THOMPSON now settled once and for all time the question of whether or not he was merely a flashy type of killer, who had to have a handicap before he made battle, whether or not he was one of those rare desperadoes famed as a Texas swap-out. . . .

Sheriff Whitney emerged from Brennan's saloon at the head of a posse. Sheriff Whitney admired this tough man from Texas; in fact, he was the most popular man in Ellsworth with all the Texans.

"Lay down your guns, Ben, and give up," the sheriff called from a safe distance. "I'll see that you don't get lynched."

Ben considered the proposal a moment; he had confidence in Sheriff Whitney.

"All right, Sheriff," he called back. "Have these mobs stack their arms in the street; I'll do the same thing."

"No! Hell, no!" roared a chorus from the mob leaders. "We got the damn killer cornered; let's go ahead and blast him off that fire engine!"

Even as the sheriff's parley continued, shooting began from a dozen windows and doors. Ben, turning slowly, eyeing every cover, shot at every moving object. A Winchester barked back down toward Brennan's saloon; a slug tore away Ben's left hip.

Ben spotted that marksman squatted in the street, boldly taking a second aim. Ben's rifle roared; the marksman straightened, pitched forward in the

dust. Sheriff Whitney was hit fatally.

The wildest confusion broke out when it was learned that the sheriff had been mortally wounded; firing slackened and ceased as dozens rushed to the scene of the fallen officer.

Ben took the opportunity to abandon his fire engine and dashed to cover behind the Grand Central Hotel. Ben was so well concealed in a stairway that he was not noticed by a number of other Texans, who now sought the safety of their informal headquarters.

In a moment or so the entire Ellsworth police force came rushing over in a body.

"Deliver up to us Ben Thompson!" the captain demanded—"produce him!"

"If you shore 'nuff want him," Shanghai Pierce replied, "it orten take you long to git him. Thar he is right behind ye."

The startled leader looked back—right down the barrel of Ben's rifle.

"The first one that makes a move dies," said Ben throatily. "Now reach for it."

The obedient police force obeyed, and at Ben's direction, some of the boys disarmed the entire lot.

"Now take off them tin badges of theirs," Ben commanded; and another Texan piled down every badge.

In a few moments Mayor Miller arrived and fired his entire police force on the spot, for which the *Banner* roundly criticized him the next day.

The mayor, a capable, courageous man, parleyed through Sid Larkin, proprietor of the Grand Central Hotel; Seth Mabry and Captain Millett, close friends of Ben and arranged the surrender of the Texas Terror, guaranteeing him a bond and, to insure his safety from lynching, agreed to let him retain his arms.

On these conditions, Ben surrendered.

The Texans speedily deserted Ellsworth. Feeling was running high. Ben went to Kansas City and the day he left the Kansans raided the Grand Central, confiscated the arsenals there. Inside of a week Cad Pierce was killed by a vigilante group headed by Deputy Sheriff Ed Hogue, and the cattle trade business from Texas died in Ellsworth.

AFTER returning from Ellsworth, Ben remained around Austin for some months. Then he learned of the strike and boom at Leadville, Colorado, and decided to give that place a whirl. He seems to have got off to a bad start there, as is shown by the following account published early in 1878 in the Austin *Statesman*:

> "Ben Thompson, who is well known around Austin, has been doing Leadville in his old familiar style, but does not seem to have played quite so successfully as he sometimes did in Texas. . . . A gentleman now in Leadville, who knows him, writes that some time ago Ben tried the faro table and lost $2,000 in money, a diamond stud worth $800, a ring worth $500, and a watch and chain worth $300 in one sitting and had to borrow some money to start home. He did not start soon enough, however, for he got drunk and turned over gambling tables, shot out the lights, run the crowd out of the house, pounded one man up with his six-shooter, and wound up by cleaning up the street with a Winchester."

At a dance a few nights later Ben run across an unnamed Mexican with whom he had trouble while serving in Matamoros under General Mejia. It is thought that this man was possibly a member of the Matamoros police when Ben was there. At any rate there was an old grudge. When they saw each other in Leadville there was the flash of a knife and four blasts from Ben's six-shooter. The man from Matamoros was dead, as was also a companion who tried to help his *compadre*.

This concluded Ben's sightseeing trip to Leadville.

(To be concluded.)

DRILLER'S DICE

A Novelette

by WILLIAM E. BARRETT

CHAPTER I

OIL TOWN SENSATION

AT 9 P. M. when he hit the dirt of the main drag from the back end of a pipe truck, Jim Fogarty was as important to the oil town of Sixtown as one of the empty cans that filled its back yards; by 12:30 he was as big a topic of conversation as a new oil strike.

Dirty, shabby, unshaven and covered with sweat, Fogarty knelt by the taut canvas under the flares and rattled the dice in one big hand. They clicked together and raced out under the light. Men crowded each other and jostled for a better view. There was an audible sigh,

"Another seven!"

"That's twelve straight passes."

From the regular gambling houses, the saloons and the eating places on the drag, new arrivals came to join the crowd. The local marshal and a few assistants, spurred on by the gambling-house men, had made several feeble attempts to break up the game; but the crowd wouldn't have it that way. An oil town liked sensations and Sixtown was getting one.

A shabby hobo had hit town with a dollar and was building himself a fortune on the edge of town. After busting all of the shabby down-at-heelers who started in the game, he'd gone right on through the men who brought bankrolls down from town. He was hot and he didn't roll his own dice.

Fogarty piled the money up on the canvas before him. It was a heap to

make any hobo's head swim. In the light of the flares, Fogarty's face was bronze, shiny with sweat. On his muscular left forearm a chunky tattooed dancer writhed. Fogarty winked at her.

"Got us a hi-yu stake, Hortense," he whispered hoarsely. "What d'yuh say?"

He deliberated a moment with his head cocked to one side as though he were listening; then he grinned.

"That's the way I figger," he said.

He pushed the money out with two hands on to the canvas.

"Thirteenth pass coming up, gentlemen," he exhorted. "Thirteen! The unlucky pass. Twelve hundred bucks in that pile, according to my tally. Any or all of it, gentlemen. Any or all for the fatal thirteen."

He was going like a side-show barker, the dice clicking in his hand, his eyes gleaming in the reflected light of the flares. A quietly dressed man of medium height moved to the front of the crowd, his authority making itself felt without noise. Keen eyes swept the canvas, the piled-up money, the triumphant Fogarty.

"You're faded," he said.

"All of it?" Fogarty looked up startled.

"All of it." The newcomer flipped out a bulging wallet, thumbed through a thick sheaf of bills and tossed a roll onto the canvas. Fogarty's white teeth flashed.

"Thirteenth pass, dice, for the gentleman's money," he whispered. The dice clicked. As his hand went back, the newcomer raised his hands.

"Stopped dice!" he said evenly. "I'd like to look at them."

Fogarty stiffened, his eyes hot for the moment. The newcomer waved his hand.

"No offense. Fader's privilege."

"Okay."

Fogarty rolled the dice across the canvas. They were red dice with white spots. The fader picked them up, rolled them around in his hand, weighed them, ran them between his hands and handed them back. Fogarty took them and polished them against his pants' leg to rub the luck back in. The crowd was quiet, tense. There were twenty-four hundred dollars on the board that would wait on one pass and it was the hobo's entire stake. The show either closed now or rolled on to new sensations. The sweat gleamed on Fogarty's face. He clicked the dice, sent them galloping and snapped his fingers.

"Tell him for me!" he shouted.

The red dice bounded, rolled over and shone pitilessly up in the light of the flares. Two sixes. Box cars. Crap.

There was a concerted sigh from the crowd and Fogarty rocked back on his heels as the stranger reached for the money. Fogarty's hand waved it away and he came slowly to his feet. He winked sadly at the chunky tattooed dancer on his forearm.

"Our fortune's going away in box cars, Hortense," he said. "Let's vamos."

The crowd was breaking up regretfully. Somebody swore.

"It would be double six," he said. "Tarbell of Six State wins on sixes. Tie that!"

A hand touched Fogarty's shoulder. He heard a hoarse whisper almost at his ear. "Don't turn around. Walk down the main drag to the shabby end. I want to see you."

Fogarty nodded. The gleam of interest lighted again in his eyes. Something else was going to happen to him and that was an oil town for you. Several members of his former audience patted him on the back and a few offered rough sympathy, but the show was over and most of the crowd drifted back to the drag end without any further interest in the man who had been the sensation of a moment. Oil country was always watching the making of millions and getting a thrill from it—and always hearing hard luck stories to which it tried not to listen.

BACK on the drag, lights twinkled cheerfully. Sixtown was an unpainted pine-board town with a lot of one-story shacks that had been tossed up in a hurry, two brick buildings, four two-story frame buildings and a half-dozen false fronts; but it made a brave show at night. Music blared from the wide doors of two barnlike dance halls, a running ribbon electric sign marked the front of a moving picture house which was showing silent pictures. Hundreds of feet beat out the tune of town on the board sidewalks while the resonant song of the donkey engines and thud of walking beams came down-wind.

Fogarty drank in the excitement of it and forgot that he was broke. The crowd from the field was in town, overflowing the boardwalks out into the rutted street. Trucks and light cars, part of the twenty-four-hour procession, bounced in and out of the ruts, rubbed fenders and snorted defiance at one another in an unending battle for the right of way.

Down at drag's end, the ruts swung wide to the county road and the board walk right-angled off into Tent Town and Agony Alley. There was no crowd in this end of town yet. Later the huskies would be drifting down with girls from the dance hall, but now it was quiet. A little man in a wide Stetson was waiting at the fork when Fogarty rolled up.

The light was bad, but Fogarty took the strong sinewy fingers that were offered him and winced a little at the other's grip. He knew that trick. A lot of skinny little jaspers practiced up on the hard handshake for the surprise value of it. The voice that came out from under the Stetson, however, was as he-human as the grip.

"Glad you rambled down, son. Lots o' men wouldn't."

Fogarty grinned. "I didn't have anything left to lose."

The little man chuckled. "Sure enough. But I like the way you lost what you had, son." Shrewd eyes gleamed from the shadows under the Stetson brim. "Haven't eaten lately, have you?"

Fogarty's grin was a trifle embarrassed. "Not for darn near two days since you're asking. I found that buck I started with."

The other chuckled again. "Sure enough. I'd 'a' that, too. Well, let's grab a bite. I got a idee or two."

Fogarty pulled his ragged belt up.

"Lead on, stranger," he said. "You've got yourself a guest."

They turned left down a block of unevenly spaced boards that rocked and slipped under their feet. At the end of the block they came upon a rough-pine shack that gave off the odor of cooking. There was a grimy window that gave no view whatever of the interior and a door that hung ajar. Fogarty's host pushed the door open and they were in a big room that was bisected by a long counter. Five or six tables were spaced haphazardly between the counter and the wall. Flush with the end of the counter was a light board partition. The counter was presided over by a fat man with sagging, unshaven jowls and a waistline out of all control. The man in the Stetson jerked his thumb toward the partition.

"Private dining room, Milligan."

The fat man grinned. "Okay, Mister Woodbury. Larsen's in there waiting."

Woodbury grunted and half turned to Fogarty.

"This is the dirtiest eating place in Oklahoma," he said, "but it's confidential."

The fat man was still grinning. "'Tain't so bad," he said. "We just had the walls painted."

Woodbury grunted. "Sure enough. Paint was about the only smell you didn't have in here."

He pushed the partition door open and Fogarty followed him in. The deep-chested, clear-eyed giant who was sitting at the table rose. His blue shirt was open at the throat and the curving lines

of his chest pushed through to either side of the V. His eyes flicked only briefly over Fogarty, but Fogarty had an idea that they did a complete job.

The little man performed the introductions in an offhand way; and when the matter was settled Fogarty knew that his host was Sam Woodbury, oil operator and wild-catter, that the bronze giant was Hans Larsen, Woodbury's tool-pusher. He wasn't nearly as interested in either fact as he was in the fact that the fat Milligan was the speed demon of the century with a frying pan. Ham and eggs came in sizzling without any order being placed. He'd expected that. Back area eating houses had a standard bill of fare.

While Fogarty was eating, Woodbury rolled a chunky cigar in his mouth. In the meantime he told Larsen the story of the crap game out of whichever corner of his mouth was free of the cigar at the moment. When he was finished, he stared for a long moment at Fogarty, who was just polishing off the fag end of the egg order with the last end of bread.

"Son," he said, "do you know how you lost yore stake in that little game?"

Fogarty's head jerked up, his eyes suddenly suspicious. Woodbury bit down hard on the cigar.

"That last throw o' yours," he said slowly, "was made with busting dice."

"You mean?" Fogarty half rose.

Woodbury waved him down.

"Sure enough, son," he said. "Tarbell switched the dice on you."

CHAPTER II

THE VANISHING DISH-WASHER

LOADED dice for a twenty-four hundred buck pass!

Fogarty's eyes narrowed and the pupils became very dark. He leaned his weight on his arms with his fists against the table top, the muscles cording in his forearms until the little tattooed dancer stood rigid as though frightened at his mood. Woodbury looked up at him, bright eyes twinkling in an incredibly wrinkled face.

"Sure enough, son," he drawled. "You got a temper. I like that."

Fogarty ignored the irrelevant statement.

"You're plumb positive about those dice?" he asked hoarsely.

Woodbury chuckled.

"Cinch. I've knowed Wade Tarbell since he was a pup wolf. He never was no gambler in nothing. Played sure shots in oil leases with suckers, run a gambling house now and again—" He shrugged. "A man like Tarbell ain't laying down big money on anything he can't control, son. That's how come he took over the dice before you rolled out."

"Okay. Thanks for the grub. Now where do I find this jasper?"

There was a grim intensity about Fogarty, a sense of something crouched inside of him and ready to spring. Woodbury waved his hand.

"Shucks, son, that's simple," he said. "Wade Tarbell is the hull o' Sixtown. Finding him ain't nothin'. Doing something about it is something else."

Something in his voice pulled Fogarty up short. He still leaned on tense forearms and the muscles still stood along his jawline, but some of the grim urgency left his face to be replaced by a look of interest in whatever the old man was getting at. Woodbury took the cigar from his teeth and waved it.

"Sixtown gets its name from Six State Petroleum," he said, "which most folks call the Double S when they ain't callin' it something dirtier. Wade Tarbell is Double S in this territory, field super and the whole works. Like all Double S supers, he's a town hogger and he just about controls everything that one o' his men can spend money on. Even the law is Wade Tarbell's." He snorted. "You wouldn't get nowhere at all, son. Them mugs in town would take you apart if Wade Tarbell said so."

"Yeah. Talk some more, settler."

Fogarty relaxed partly and eased himself into a chair. His eyes were narrowed, fixed intently on Woodbury. He knew now that the man had a personal feud against Tarbell and that it was no admiration for a good loser that had led to the set-up of a meal. Woodbury chewed viciously on the shredded cigar.

"There's ways and ways o' evening with a man," he said. "I'll tell you one o' them. In a manner o' speaking, this Tarbell switched dice on me, too." His eyes were thoughtful. He waved the cigar suddenly. "Tell him, Hans."

The big tool-pusher cleared his throat and looked at his hands.

"We got us a well we're making," he said slowly. "We used to have a lot of them but we're down to this one on a lease that don't give us none the best of it. We got a time limit and we got to bring in a well and we don't get any renewals and no options."

Woodbury nodded his head. "That's what comes from not having enough money when you're trading."

Larsen looked at his hands again. "Our strip cuts right in between two strips o' the Double S and they don't like that. They make it plenty tough for us, you bet. Last well came in this county at five thousand, two hundred and forty feet. When we reach four thousand, somebody cuts our cable. We been fishing for three weeks."

Woodbury could keep still no longer. His fist hit the table. "Sure enough. And every time one of my men sticks his nose in town, he gets thrown in the can for something. I got bond money up now for six arrests and it has me near busted with that money tied up. The dang coyotes tip over every truck tries to bring me tools or supplies—and I got ten days left before my lease runs out and Double S jumps in on it."

Fogarty digested that, his eyes level. "And so what?"

The old man took time out to light his cigar, his shrewd eyes squinting through the smoke.

"It's got so that no driver's got guts enough to drive one of my trucks," he said slowly, "and I got to have a combination socket and some other stuff from the supply house at Snake River. We got an impression block out o' the well and Hans figures he can get them tools out with the right grabs. After that we got a chance."

Fogarty scraped a few crumbs of tobacco out of his pocket and built himself a cigarette.

"You want me to bring those tools in?"

Woodbury nodded. "That's the idee. I reckon that with your guts and how you feel about Tarbell, you're going to be hard to stop. Mebbe you'll get through. If you do and I get my well, that twelve hundred bucks that he double diced out o' you is goin' to be chicken feed to what it'll cost him."

Fogarty looked grimly at his cigarette.

"It won't ever be chicken feed to me," he said.

Woodbury chuckled. "Sure enough. Well, son, you get through and get those tools to me and if I get my well, I'll give your twelve hundred back to you."

Fogarty's head came up with a jerk and he looked hard at Sam Woodbury; then he looked beyond him to where a bearded face was visible through a crack in the partition boarding, an intent face screwed into the concentrated expression of a man who is listening. Fogarty came hurriedly to his feet and took the room in a stride. Larsen's chair was in the way and it took him several seconds to get the little door open. Beyond the partition was a room with a big tub and piled-up dishes.

The bearded man was gone.

Fogarty turned back to the room that he had just left. Milligan, the fat proprietor, was there. Fogarty jerked his thumb over his shoulder.

"Where'd you get the pearl diver?"

"Pearl diver?" The fat face was ludicrously puzzled; then comprehension came. "You mean the dish-washer? Shucks. He just drifted in. They all

do. Feller named Clancy. Down on his luck but with a good Irish tag on him."

Fogarty grunted. "Yeah? Well, next time you better get one with a Swede tag. Maybe he'll stay longer."

He resumed his seat at the table. Woodbury seemed annoyed at the interruption and neither he nor Larsen seemed curious about the dish-washer. Then Woodbury took out a battered wallet and counted a hundred dollars onto the table.

"Expense money," he said. "They'll bill me for the tools, but you may get in a jam and need money to get out."

Fogarty looked at the bills without touching them.

"How do you know I won't get in another crap game?" he asked. Woodbury shrugged.

"I know men," he said. "Likewise, you got a bigger stake than any hundred bucks in this game."

Fogarty took the bills and folded them into his pocket.

"Okay," he said. "You'll get your tools, mister."

CHAPTER III

FIFTY TO ONE

$ FOGARTY walked the drag again and this time he had a hundred dollars in his pocket. It was not the first time that he had had a hundred dollars, nor the first time he had had twelve hundred, nor the first time that he had been broke. A lot of lands had known Fogarty and a lot of trades. He had drifted with the tides of fortune and the tides had always brought him to harbor.

There was a bigger mob in town now than there had been before; the noise was increasing as men, wearied from a twelve-hour tower in the field, picked up new energy with oil-town grub and oil-town liquor. Fogarty found a deserted hitching rack that was a remnant of the days when Sixtown had been called something else and catered to cattle country trade. Perched upon it, he had a grandstand seat for the nightly grand pageant of oil.

He rolled a thoughtful cigarette and squinted through the smoke. He was no Sherlock Holmes and he had no particular interest in the case of the vanishing dish-washer, but he was curious to know why Woodbury and Larsen had not been interested. It was a weak link in a convincing piece of business. Men who go to all the trouble of getting a private room in a hideaway eating dump for a secret and confidential discussion are generally keyed up to any intrusion on their privacy. Woodbury and his tool-pusher had not run true to form.

Fogarty smoked thoughtfully. Woodbury had promised to have a truck on the edge of town for him in an hour. He had an order on the Snake River Supply House for the needed tools, in his pocket. He also had a hundred dollars. That hundred dollars, too, was funny. It was either too much or too little as Fogarty sized the play. He tensed his left fist and looked at Hortense.

"How you betting, Hortense," he said softly, "that this husky Scandinavian Larsen wouldn't go after those tools in spite of hell?" He let smoke drift from his nostrils. "Or that this Woodbury cookie couldn't have hired one hi-yu tough mob to slap his tools through for the twelve hundred cut he offered me?"

He opened his hand slowly and the little dancer relaxed. Her features, rigid for the moment as if with attention, were suddenly smiling again. Fogarty slid from the rail.

"You and me both, Hortense," he said slowly.

He swaggered into the milling mob and let it carry him on up the drag. He was not self-conscious about his talks with Hortense nor did he think it silly. A man who lives as Fogarty lived can trust few people and a man must talk his ideas out. Hortense never betrayed.

Midway up the drag was the Silver Star Dance Hall. The music that came

from the wide doorway was louder than the music of the competitor up the way; the crowd was larger and the adjoining building was one of the four two-story buildings in town. Those facts coupled with the significant name—two esses again—were enough for Fogarty. This would be the night-time headquarters of Wade Tarbell.

Men were drifting in and out through the wide doors and Fogarty went with the inflowing tide. The big room was dimly lighted and men in rough khaki, corduroys and overalls stood in lines three deep behind the ropes which sectioned off the dance-floor. The mingled odors of liquor, sweat and raw oil filled the room.

Inside the ropes were the dancers, men like those who waited at the ropes and girls in gingham dresses or overalls. At the far end of the hall was a long counter where a sour-faced man sat behind a pile of tickets. It was two-bits a dance and the girls got half.

Fogarty fingered the bills in his pocket and squared his jaw against temptation. He eyed the crowd appraisingly. Husky, brown, quick-tempered men who lived a hard life in a practically hundred percent masculine world, they were as tough as any men have a right to be. A man wouldn't have to look very hard for trouble and it was Six State territory. Behind him he could hear a husky, drunken voice telling the story of the crap game that he was trying to forget. It irritated him and he started to move away; then the narrator reached his climax in a chuckling gurgle and Fogarty stopped.

"Braggin' like a bull, this here lucky tramp was! Braggin' as how he could pass all night and mebbe next Sunday mornin'. Pushin' money at the boys and a bullin' his luck—then up comes Old Man Tarbell. Some o' the boys has tipped him off that this here tramp is ruinin' business on the drag with his free show. 'Cover all you got', the boss tells him and this hobo don't know no better. Just when he's set to shoot, the boss sez 'Lemme see the dice.' Hah! Ain't that the pay-off? Let him see the dice. After that, this hobo don't see them dice no more. What he sees is educated dominoes and how! Right out on boxcars he rolls 'em and the poor slob don't know what hit him."

The voice rasped off into a rough guffaw in which several other men joined. Fogarty didn't turn around. There was flame glowing deep in his eyes but his face did not change expression. He fumbled with his hat brim for a long second and elbowed his way through the crowd to the small door on the right, through which the clink of glasses sounded.

There was a well-equipped bar in there and a crowd to keep it busy. The bartenders went in for no fancy touches. They ladled out whiskey and nothing else. Nobody specified rye, bourbon or Scotch; he laid his money down and took what came over the counter. Fogarty flipped a dash of liquid lightning, pocketed the change from a twenty dollar bill and looked toward the stairs beyond the bar. The significant click of roulette came down those stairs with the tense hum of voices that characterizes a gambling room. Fogarty jerked his thumb toward those stairs.

"Tarbell up there?" he asked.

The bartender cocked one eyebrow.

"I reckon," he said indifferently.

Fogarty nodded and turned to the stairs. It was a short flight; and he found just about what he expected to find, a tense, business-like room in which men played a half a dozen different games of chance with hard-eyed dealers for the house. At the far end of the room was a door with a black lettered sign reading "Private." Fogarty barged across the room and pushed the door open without knocking.

Wade Tarbell half rose from his chair behind the desk and the drawer in the middle of the desk opened under his right hand. The man who had been

talking to him with his back to the door whirled like a cat, his hand moving toward his armpit. Fogarty closed the door and leaned against it.

"The name's Fogarty," he said quietly. "Maybe you wouldn't remember. You faded me in a crap game tonight."

THE MAN who was with Tarbell slid clear of the desk and put his back to the sidewall, his right hand still buried under his left armpit. Wade Tarbell sank back slowly into his chair, his hand still resting on the edge of the open drawer.

"Yes, I remember," he said, "but you've still got a hell of a lot of nerve busting in here."

His eyes were narrowed and there was a crouching look about him. Fogarty looked at him calmly.

"A man's got to get his money where he lost it," he said evenly. "I just came to get it back."

"Yeah?" For a moment Tarbell seemed stunned by the audacity of the man before him; then the left corner of his lip lifted from gleaming white teeth in a contemptuous smile. "All you want is your money back? Well, bum, you won't get it. You were faded and you lost and there's no rain checks in that kind of game. Now scram!"

He gestured toward the door. Fogarty didn't move.

"I didn't come up here to ask you for anything," he said. "I came up here to make you a bet."

Tarbell's eyes flicked momentarily toward the man against the wall; then came back in a puzzled stare to Fogarty.

"A bet?"

"You heard me."

Fogarty was holding all of his seething anger under control and playing his game for the long haul, pacing himself. He drew the crumpled bills from his pocket and counted seventy-five dollars out on the desk. Wade Tarbell, chained by his own curiosity, looked at the money. From an inner pocket, Fogarty took Sam Woodbury's order on the Snake River Supply House, unfolded it and laid it beside the money.

"I'm going after those tools," he said evenly. "What odds will you lay against my chances of bringing them through?"

That was coming too fast for the already puzzled Tarbell. He'd been set for protest at his crookedness, for violence, for argument and maybe gunplay; he'd got none of those things. The hobo hadn't run to form—and now this! He picked up the order and read it over. He looked for a moment as though he wanted to destroy it, but he realized that Fogarty could probably get another. He looked up, the gambler's mask on his features.

"What odds do you want?"

Fogarty shrugged. "How about sticking my twelve hundred up against it? That's only 16 to 1."

Wade Tarbell smiled. For a moment the mask was down and his eyes said that it was a good thousand to one bet that no single truck would cross his territory on a show-down proposition if he decreed that it should not cross.

"Sixteen to one is fair enough," he said. "Bet."

"Okay." Fogarty shrugged. "Register your bet and make out my ticket."

Tarbell's eyes widened a little and he laughed. With one hand he made a motion as though to push the money away.

"Come in again some time," he sneered. "You may be brighter than you look but I didn't get where I am by being dumb. If you think I'm going to commit myself at 16 to 1 on paper to interfering with another oil company's trucks, you picked the wrong sucker."

Fogarty managed to look disappointed, made a motion as though to pick up the money—and compromised on the order instead. He folded the order into his pocket and let the money lie.

"Okay," he said. "Write it out this way. You're betting that Woodbury's

well won't come in before his ten days are up. I'm betting it does. Me, I'm bringing him the tools he needs."

Tarbell almost laughed in his face. He reached for a pad and Fogarty checked him.

"Just a minute, mister. The odds go up. That well was only down four thousand when the cable was cut—" he saw anger snap into Tarbell's eyes and amended his statement—"or busted. He's got to get the tools I bring him and fish out his lost string and go down to five thousand, two hundred forty in ten days. I figger that doubles the odds and a kicker. Fifty to one, I figger it."

Wade Tarbell hesitated, then shrugged.

"All right," he said indifferently. "Fifty to one, it is." His eyes were agate hard as he lifted them for a moment before he wrote. "I don't want your lousy seventy-five bucks," he said, "but you walk in here with ideas and some lip. You're entitled to walk out of here with nothing."

He wrote swiftly, slapped the paper across the desk and pocketed the seventy-five dollars; then he rose and, throwing a slanting look of warning toward the man against the wall, stepped around the desk to Jim Fogarty. He was no longer suave, mocking nor semi-polite. There were hard, cold depths in his eyes and his too-white teeth gleamed viciously under his curled lip. He tapped one forefinger against Fogarty's breastbone.

"Now, wise guy," he said, "you've made a bum bet and if you've got a brain in your head, you'll forget those seventy-five lousy bucks and get to hell out of this country. I won't put it on paper but—" his finger drilled emphasis to the words—"you haven't got a snowball's chance in hell of bringing any truck down here to Woodbury."

Fogarty folded the receipt for his bet carefully and tucked it in his pocket.

"Too bad I'm broke," he said softly, "or I'd bet you—"

Ignoring the sudden movement of the man against the wall, he turned on his heel and stalked out through the door marked "Private." The door slammed behind him.

CHAPTER IV

THE FISTS OF FOGARTY

FOGARTY took a dozen strides southward from the Silver Star and stopped deliberately to roll and light a cigarette. Scores of huskies jostled by him as he stood teetering on the edge of the board sidewalk, but he paid no attention to them. He was keyed to one man and he knew when the man followed his example and came to a stop, knew it from the flow of the crowd as one would know by watching the flow of currents that a stream was being diverted past an obstruction.

That was all that Fogarty wanted to know or had to know. He was being followed and he would have been disappointed if he had not been followed. He got his cigarette burning and stalked down the drag.

Just beyond the southern limits of town a truck was drawn to the side of the road with no lights showing. Twenty-five yards beyond it a flivver faced away. Fogarty had lost the footsteps of his trailer back where the crowd thinned at the Agony Alley fork, but he had detected an occasional furtive movement behind him and knew that the man was staying with him, even if he was making hard work of it. The bulking figure of Hans Larsen loomed out of the shadows beside the truck.

"You're late," he said.

Fogarty made an apologetic gesture.

"No clock," he said. "My guesser's maybe slow."

Woodbury had been sitting on the running board of the truck. He was chewing a cigar and his nerves seemed bad. He had the air of a hot-tempered man straining at the leash.

"Time is worth more than muscle,"

he said testily. "You've made a bad start with us, Fogarty."

"Sorry. But we can't buy it back by yammering some more time away. What do I do with this truck; wheel it right up the drag?"

"No. No. You'd be arrested on a traffic charge." Woodbury's voice was sharp. "What you've got to do is turn right this side of the Alley and go around Tent Town."

Larsen was nodding his head.

"Watch the road," he said. "It's pretty bad. You'll have three miles of it; then you'll hit the county road. That's better."

"Sure enough. Better come back the same way." Woodbury had quieted down but it had been hard on his cigar. He had it chewed to pulp. He pointed out along the highway in the direction in which the flivver was pointed. "Our well is to the right on the second fork. Six miles south and four and a half west. You can't miss it."

"Okay. You'll get your stuff." Fogarty had one foot on the running board. Woodbury held out a shiny pistol.

"Better have a gun along in case—"

Fogarty waved him down.

"Nope. I'd probably run into somebody could use one better."

He swung under the wheel and stepped on the starter. It was an old truck but not a stemwinder. The engine came to life with a roar. Woodbury climbed the running board and raised his voice to carry over the engine clatter.

"I'm trusting you with a truck and a big job," he said, "and I'm betting a whole lot on your guts. If—"

"There ain't any ifs. I'm seeing my job through for you. Oke!"

He waved and Woodbury dropped off the running-board. Larsen was already half-way to the flivver and the little man in the Stetson hurried after him. Fogarty eased the clutch in and moved slowly out into the road. His arm rested lightly on the vibrating wheel and Hortense wiggled seductively. He winked at her.

"Everybody wishing us good luck, too. Did you notice?" he whispered.

The truck rolled into the ruts and throbbed along. He looked back and saw a winking red tail light that bounced up and down along the road to the south. Friend Larsen was driving fast. Something thudded and scraped on the running board of the truck. Fogarty leaned over to the right side of the cabin and looked out. In the reflected light of his own glimmers he saw a bearded face beneath a pulled down felt. The man was gripping the edge of the door for support and straightening slowly from the running-board.

"How's for a ride, brother?" he said huskily. Fogarty shifted his eyes to the road.

"You seem to be taking one, settler."

The man on the running-board seemed to take that as an invitation. He opened the door and stepped in. Fogarty didn't believe in coincidences and even if he hadn't remembered the face of the dishwasher at the crack in the partition, he would have known that this was the mug who had been following him. It was all so clumsy. He rolled the wheel over and took the turn north of Agony Alley and down the cowtrail to Tent Town.

"I ain't goin' through Sixtown," he growled.

"That's okay. I don't want none of it. I lost all my money there."

The bearded man was making himself comfortable, but he watched Fogarty warily out of the corner of his eye.

Fogarty said, "Yeah."

There was very little further opportunity for conversation. They were rocking and bouncing over one of the worst roads in the world. Fogarty's muscles strained at the wheel and the unloaded back end of the truck whipped up and down over every rut and bump and hollow. For a quarter of a mile on the east end of Tent Town, the road

leveled a trifle. The bearded man bit off a chaw of tobacco.

"My name's Clancy," he said. "I don't suppose you'd be goin' so far as Snake River?"

"Yeah?" Fogarty grinned. "What makes you such a bum guesser? Snake River's exactly where I'm going."

"Good!"

Clancy tried to act surprised but he wasn't an actor even with the help of a beard. He didn't bull his luck. He let the one word stand and sat tight. He bulked a little over Fogarty but he looked flabby. Fogarty filed that away for future reference. The road was one hundred per cent washboard again and the going was too tough for thinking.

Twenty minutes later they hit the county road, a road that would be terrible to any one who hadn't come over the Tent Town cut-off. Fogarty found it restful. The old truck snorted northward and he lounged behind the wheel. Clancy did no talking but his jaws worked noisily on the cud in time with the throbbing engine.

A light truck boomed by them with the horn barking for room. It tore up the grade ahead of them at a rate that rocked it from one side of the road to the other. Fogarty eyed it speculatively and spat over the mudguards. Clancy hunched himself in the seat as though suddenly uncomfortable.

"Fast, ain't they?" he grunted.

Fogarty shrugged.

"Motion ain't always speed," he said. "It depends on how far you're going."

He kept the truck on an even, snorting gait up the hill and topped the rise which put them on a narrow ribbon road with a rock strewn slope off their right. As the truck started down, Fogarty cursed and jammed his brake pedal to the floor. His right hand dropped to the emergency and pulled it hard. The truck slithered sidewise and squealed to a stop.

Less than ten yards ahead of them the light truck was pulled to a stop in the center of the road with no lights showing. Two men were out looking under the hood. Fogarty's eyes narrowed and he measured the clearance to the right of the stalled truck. The road edge was crumbly and the clearance was not enough. It would be too bad for any vehicle that once slid off. It would turn over at least three times before it came to a stop. Fogarty spat. He didn't believe in coincidences.

Easing the brake, he rolled down to within a few feet of the stalled truck. Two burly looking roughnecks turned to the glare of the headlights. Fogarty measured them thoughtfully. As beef on the hoof, they loomed up; as fighting material, he wasn't so sure. They sized up like a pair of tubs who could be hired out of any saloon for any kind of a cheap play. They lacked the lean hardness of the boys who swung wrenches and set bits into the earth after oil. He swung down.

"How's for one of you guys to get in the go-wagon and let me push you over to the side?" he said. "I gotta get by."

"If you gotta get by, you get by! See!" One of the roughnecks stuck his jaw out and spat. Fogarty walked over to him.

"You don't sound cooperative, brother," he said softly.

His fist followed his voice and it made up in hardness what his voice lacked. It snapped like a broken cable and it moved the roughneck's chin back into neutral territory. The man's eyes crossed and his legs started to jell at the knees. Set to throw his left, Fogarty pulled up short. He knew when a man was out.

He reached out with the flat of his hand and pushed the roughneck back on the heels. There was nothing left to maintain balance and the man went all the way over. Fogarty didn't watch him fall. He stepped into the other man and threw his left as he stepped.

It was fast action and the second man couldn't get untracked. His eyes flickered back from his falling partner in bare time to see the left coming at him. He

pulled his head in and that was perfect.

Fogarty uppercutted him with a right that came from his knees and laid him over the mudguard with his head under the hood.

The first man was stirring slightly but Fogarty didn't pay any attention to him. He lifted the second victim's feet onto the running-board, loosened the truck's emergency brake and turned it into the ditch on the left hand side of the road. He left it there and wiped his hands off as he walked back to his own truck. Clancy was staring at him wide-eyed and Fogarty met the stare.

"Where were you during the big war?" he growled.

Clancy fidgetted uneasily.

"I didn't have no time to get into it," he said weakly. Fogarty shrugged.

"Okay," he said wearily. "Those two apes were only playing anyway. The serious work starts on the back trip when I get my load. Somebody, I reckon, wanted a line on me."

"Oh. That's how it is." Clancy's tone was vague and he slid down into the seat as the truck picked up speed. "I thought maybe those two guys really wanted trouble."

Fogarty looked at him doubtfully, then looked ahead.

"So did they, brother," he said softly. "That's exactly what they thought."

CHAPTER V

FOGARTY DRAWS A SURPRISE

HANK BEACH, the Supply Company storekeeper at Snake River, was short and wiry and bald, with rough gray stubble on his hollow cheeks. He looked at Fogarty with neither friendliness nor hostility but with a strange blend of each; an attitude possible only in a country where even warlike men have to stay neutral when they sell goods. He read the order with professional interest.

"Take dang near an hour to put the stuff on the platform for ye," he said. "Ye load yerself."

"Okay. I'll grab a bite to eat." Fogarty made a motion as though to turn away, then shot his deliberate afterthought. "Any Six State trucks hauling south out o' here tonight?"

Hank Beach looked up from the job of packing his pipe. "One of 'em making a pick-up."

"What time?"

The old-timer's eyes didn't change expression, but his teeth clamped grimly on his pipe stem as he struck a match. "Whaddye want to know fer?"

Fogarty snorted. "Hell! You know how it is in our section of county. I'm going to have it tough enough putting a truck through to Woodbury without a Double S on my tail."

The old timer considered that judicially. He shrugged thin shoulders.

"Ye've got time enough," he said. "The Double S feller ain't due till dang near midnight. He's a regular. Comes through once a week and don't miss his time much."

Fogarty touched his fingers to his hat. "Much obliged, settler. That fixes me up."

His eyes gleamed a little as he turned away. It did fix him up better than the old-timer realized. If the S. S. truck came through at midnight, that placed it about an hour after he picked up his own load. It was as nice a piece of timing as if he had controlled all of the factors himself. He walked slowly down the newly paved street beyond the Supply House and rolled a cigarette.

It was the night after his introduction to Sixtown. He had rolled into Snake River at 7:45 A.M. after four hours on the road and he'd slept most of the day. That had been according to Sam Woodbury's suggestion and his own inclination. Woodbury had cautioned him against risking daylight traffic with the easily recognized Woodbury truck. It would be too easy to push him into the

ditch on crowded roads. At night he had a chance of making a run—a slim chance, of course, but better than none at all.

The truck was in a garage a few blocks away and Bob Clancy was scheduled to meet him at the truck. Fogarty had played it that way, promising the dishwasher five bucks to come down and help him load. The five bucks was waste, of course, because Clancy would be tailing around somewhere anyway; but Fogarty didn't want the whiskered man doing crude gumshoe acts around corners. He wanted him where he could see him and put his hands on him and use him. Clancy, of course, thought that Fogarty was a rube and that the five dollars was gravy. Everybody was happy.

Strolling indifferently, like a man with time to kill and a cigarette to smoke, Fogarty sized up the supply company neighborhood. A good lay of the land was vital to his plans.

Turning right from the loading platform, the street ran up-hill for two blocks and right-angled into Main Street. It was paved and got more respectable as it climbed. Snake River had had its boom, and booms die when paving comes in; it was a community now and not a madhouse. It had a Rotary Club.

Across the street from the warehouse at a slight angle was the railroad depot. Left from the loading platform, the roads were fanned out to the south; three of them. Town's end was just one block to the left and there was only a filling station between the warehouse and the roads to the fields. Fogarty walked out a hundred and fifty yards to where the roads forked. There was a billboard there which faced Snake River and all of the traffic that flowed out of it by the county roads.

That suited his purpose nicely and he walked back. The one thing that could lick him now would be for the Double S truck to go out the state highway on the other end of town. He didn't think that would happen. Pleasure automobiles made it miserable for trucks on

the state highways and that route added thirty miles to the Sixtown trip.

He stalked into the garage with just five minutes to go before pick-up time. Clancy was sitting in the swamper's seat with his feet sticking over the door. There was a look of contentment on his face and a badly mauled toothpick in his mouth. Fogarty jerked his thumb.

"Okay, kid. Time to get the lead out. We roll."

Clancy let his feet down reluctantly and Fogarty slid under the wheel. The truck snorted out in reverse and thudded down the hill to the Supply Company loading platform. It took twenty minutes to stow the load. Hank Beach took Fogarty's signature of acceptance and looked at his watch.

"Ye got forty minutes at the most and I doubt that much," he said. "Good luck to ye."

He hobbled inside and Fogarty rolled it away. Till he was beyond the signboard he kept the truck snorting at its regular pace; then he pulled in to the side of the road. Clancy looked at him inquiringly. Fogarty countered the look with silence while he rolled a cigarette. He settled back and smoked it. Clancy writhed. There were questions in his washed-out eyes, but he kept his mouth shut. He was no actor and he knew it —and he'd have to play a part if he talked. It was hard on him. Fogarty looked thoughtfully at Hortense and she wiggled, too.

Fogarty didn't have a watch but he had timed a deliberative cigarette from the rolling to the last drag as thirteen minutes. He rolled another one and smoked it through. He rested a few minutes then and stretched languidly.

"Clancy," he said, "how'd you like a job?"

"Huh?" Clancy came to life with a jerk.

Fogarty played with his hat brim.

"Just like that," he said. "I ain't got a bit o' use for Sixtown and I got a girl in Snake River I'd like to hang around. Whaddye say that you take the truck and the load to old man Woodbury? I'll write him a note tellin' him to pay you off instead o' me. You get twenty-five bucks."

He was looking straight into Clancy's face and he saw the swift gleam of triumph and greed that came into the man's eyes. The loose lips all but watered. Clancy wiped his hands on his pants' leg.

"Why, sure," he said. "Sure, I'll do that for you."

"I thought you would." Fogarty nodded; then sniffed.

"Whoa up a minute," he said. "First the liquor, kid. Hand it over!"

"Liquor?"

"Yeah. Gin. You stink of it." Fogarty wrinkled up his weatherbeaten face. "Think I'd let any guy drink while he was driving for me?"

Very reluctantly, Clancy dragged out a square bottle. Fogarty confiscated it piously and put it in his pocket. He wrote hastily on a scrap of paper and passed the note over.

"Okay, kid," he said. "That's the pay-off. Take it away!"

HE SLID out from under the wheel and strode away without a backward glance. Clancy stared after him in amazement, then gripped the wheel with a throaty chuckle. The truck barked and went into action. Fogarty heard it go and stopped for a moment by the side of the road. He took the square bottle from his pocket.

"This will help a lot," he said. "I forgot to get any." He tilted his head back and brought it down again with a bitter curse.

"The scum!" he growled. "I might have known he'd get some two-bit African gin that a white man couldn't drink!" He lifted the bottle as if to throw it, then reconsidered and put it in his pocket again. "You can't tell," he said thoughtfully.

The truck was drumming away into the distance now. Fogarty didn't look after it. He was squinting at the lights of the filling station and trying to see past them to the supply company loading platform. It was no go but he wasn't worried yet. If Beach had been right—and no man ever looked accurate if he didn't—then the S. S. truck was not quite due yet. Fogarty figured that the exchange which occurred after the second cigarette took up about the same amount of time as a third cigarette would have taken. Three times thirteen was still thirty-nine. It would take a few minutes to service the Six State truck.

He squatted down behind the sign board and the filling station lights were blotted out. He could see the dark outline of a small truck beside the platform. His muscles tensed and he could feel the drilling of his heart. He had picked a spot for himself and he knew it and he had sense enough to be a bit scared; but he didn't make bets or agreements without following through.

The bulbs which threw light on the sign from gooseneck fittings were strong enough to throw light of a sort through cracks in the boards. Fogarty looked at the chunky dancer on his arm. His fists were clenched and she was a very rigid little dancer.

"Hortense," he said, "did you see that bum, Clancy? No guy that wasn't flipping an angle would have taken that job like that. He'd figure I'd already been paid for the whole trip and was running a shindig. Not Clancy. All that buzzard saw was an opportunity."

He chuckled softly. "Right now that dish-bathing slob is picturing Mr. Bigshot Clancy rolling in with a wanted truck that he captured all by his little self. We know different, Hortense. That's going to be a captured truck only till Mister Bigshot gets it past the toughest stretch. Nobody's going to hi-jack a Woodbury truck that's already captured. Nobody's going to hi-jack a bona fide Six State truck that we'll be driving right behind him, either, Hortense."

He wanted another cigarette but didn't risk it. He fingered the wrench in his pocket and almost wished that he'd taken the gun when he could have had it. Most of his plan hinged on the Six State driver being alone. Most of them were. Six State was so well organized at all the stops that it would have been extravagant to carry a swamper with every load. If this were the exception, it was going to be tough; but he had a plan for that, too.

His lips were pressed hard against his teeth and his muscles were tense. The waiting was tough and Clancy was rolling up his headstart southward. His eyes strained to the semi-darkness down by the loading platform. Then suddenly the lights of the truck by the loading platform came on. Fogarty's heart, which had been thudding hard in his chest, leaped up into his throat and threw a flip-flop. There were too many red lights on the truck.

It rolled gently out onto the road and came slowly toward him. He could see the outlines of it distinctly now and there was no chance of making a mistake. He had forgotten to ask Hank Beach what kind of Six State truck made the weekly stop and Hank Beach volunteered nothing. Fogarty looked ruefully at Hortense, rubbed his sweating hands against his breeches and slid to the end of the billboard frame. He had no alternative now but to go through with his plan of hi-jacking the Double S truck.

And the truck was a soup truck—loaded to the guards with nitro-glycerin.

CHAPTER VI

DEATH WAGON

THE soup truck bore down upon Fogarty like some red-eyed Nemesis; unhurried, relentless, inevitable. Fogarty wiped his wet palms again, spat in the

road and measured his distance. The glinting light from the billboard revealed a lone man in the driver's cabin. Soup trucks carried the irreducible minimum in man-power. The loss was less when things went wrong.

For a second, the truck was broadside to Fogarty and in that second he sprang. His foot found the running-board and his sinewy hands closed on the railing that ran around the truck. The driver threw him a startled glance and Fogarty slid in beside him, his pocket bulging with fake armament.

"It's a heist, guy," he said grimly. "Take it quietly."

The driver grunted.

"Watch that pop gun," he growled. "Do you know what you're playing with, tough guy?"

"Sure, I know." Fogarty was still grimly hunched. "It's still a heist. You're driving south on the back o' the town's road."

The driver was gripping the wheel tightly, watching the road.

"I always drive that way. It's the law," he said. "And so what?"

"So we're both satisfied." Fogarty sat back comfortably.

The driver flashed him another look of inquiry and braked to a stop. He hadn't taken up soup driving because he had a weak heart and he was no flabby push-over like the would-be hard rocks of the road north.

"We're not both satisfied—not by a damned sight," he growled. "You've got a gun and I might match you pennies for it or something, but I don't play cops and robbers with nobody when I've got my back to one hundred twenty quarts of soup. Not me, mister. One of us is going to get out and walk."

Fogarty sighed. His back was braced against the seat and there was room for leverage in the cab. His muscles bunched and he swung.

There was a sharp crack like the breaking of a two-by-four and the driver's head snapped back against the top of the seat. Fogarty cracked him again for luck and slid over him to the wheel. The driver slumped over on his face into the spot that Fogarty had just vacated and Fogarty let him lie there. It was much too close to town for him to make a pedestrian out of a Double S driver.

He had a jittery second as he put the truck into gear. One hundred and twenty quarts of the world's deadliest explosive would move when he did. He shrugged and the truck rolled.

The sweat rolled off him for the first mile and his muscles quivered when the car jolted in the ruts, but he twisted his fingers into the wheel. Hortense danced madly but he didn't look at her. His eyes were on the road.

There was a grunt from the seat beside him. The ex-driver was up on one elbow and staring at him out of truculent eyes. Fogarty returned the grunt.

"Get up and return that poke if you want to do it," he said, "but this playtoy won't be stopped and you might be slow grabbing the wheel."

"I thought of that." The other man was sitting straight now.

"Okay. We understand each other."

There was silence for another mile, most of it uphill. Fogarty was finding himself, and the shock of knowing that there was quick and violent death with him as an invisible passenger had worn off. Fogarty had ridden with death before and had walked with it. The former driver watched him curiously.

"My name's McGann," he said at length, "and there's no hard feelings—maybe. But what in hell is it all about?"

Fogarty thought it over.

"I'm getting used to this thing," he said. "When I've got it tamed, I'm going to let it out and really catch a guy that's got a twelve-minute head start in a truck."

McGann straightened. "Not with me, you ain't."

"Okay. Not with you. When we're in the middle of nowhere, you're going

to walk. It's tough but necessary. You work for a lousy outfit."

McGann grunted again and relaxed. Fogarty didn't like that grunt and he had an idea that McGann wasn't going to be easy to unload when the time came. There was not all of the time in the world for shadow boxing either. Woodbury had made a crack to the effect that time was worth more than muscle. Well, there were occasions when that was gospel and this was one of them. Fogarty had spent a lot of effort in building this set-up and a bum break in time could conk the whole structure. He started to let the soup truck out.

He could feel the tightening of the man beside him. They cut fast around a curve and headlights bathed them. McGann yelled, "The siren, you fathead!"

Fogarty was worried. If he could sight Clancy's tail-lights ahead, he would gladly pull down and get rid of McGann—or try to get rid of him—and he should be pulling close enough to get some sight on the long level stretches or from the higher hills. He was nearly far enough from anywhere to try and dump McGann anyway, but that passing car had made him thoughtful. Traffic was very light on this worst of all the three highways south, but it would only take the accident of one Double S car bowling along to upset his scheme.

In fact, he was beginning to see holes in the scheme. It had looked better from a distance.

Then, suddenly, his mind was made up. McGann was no help and he could be a menace in the car as well as out

Fogarty didn't know where the siren was. He threw the wheel hard over and the oncoming driver interpreted the red lights in a hurry. His flivver almost turned a somersault in leaving the road clear. There was paper-thin clearance between the fenders of the two cars. McGann was swearing.

"Cut it down!" he yelled. "Cut it down!"

Fogarty was sweat-bathed again. This monstrous firecracker seemed to be running away with him. He found the siren and worked it for luck and for a test. It made an ungodly noise.

of it. With a twist of his shoulders, Fogarty eased the throttle and, as the car slowed, he applied the brake.

The soup truck took the slight jar of the stop and then McGann uncoiled like a tensed spring that is suddenly released. He was on Fogarty like a tiger and his powerful arms worked like pistons. Fogarty had been tensed for it but the man's fury surprised him. He rolled off the first two blows and then he was tying his man up and rolling with him.

The wheel pinned Fogarty back and the arc of his swing was ruined. McGann got his knees up on the seat and trans-

ferred them gradually to Fogarty. Little by little Fogarty went under.

It came to him suddenly that he had no chance in fighting back. He had to slide all the way under and get his arms close to him. McGann was panting and the close quarters hampered him, too. Fogarty's left arm was crooked across his face.

He was a tough target now, drawn away under. The wheel was giving McGann almost as much trouble as Fogarty himself had had—and Fogarty was gathering his muscles, bunching under the punishment. The inevitable happened. McGann lost his fury and tried to place one punch. He set himself—and Fogarty exploded under him.

McGann went out over the door and they finished it on the ground. McGann, so groggy that he could scarcely get to his feet, made one valiant charge. Fogarty watched him come and hit him twice. The soup man folded and Fogarty laid him carefully on the scrubby grass a few feet off the road. He wiped his hands and reeled back to the truck.

CHAPTER VII

SIZZLING SOUP

THE road stretched like a black ribbon ahead. Fogarty rode it down with his jaw locked grimly. After a while when the smart of his wounds bothered him less, he became aware of a rising odor in the cab. He sniffed and for a moment, grim fear moved in on him. If the soup was leaking?

"The gin!"

He almost shouted his relief. Somehow in the struggle, the gin bottle had become a casualty. The loss didn't pain him. It had been particularly bad gin. He checked the seat for broken glass and rode on. He had less fear of the soup truck now and more fear of Clancy's ambition.

The reformed dish-washer had demonstrated a heavier foot on the throttle than Fogarty had credited him with and he had got his money's worth out of a twelve-minute start. He opened up another notch and a gleaming tail-light rushed to him out of the darkness. He tensed and his hand found the siren.

Then he saw the truck—and it was not Clancy.

A white face stared out at him as he careened by and it sobered him. Nobody had any right to get so used to swift, annihilating death as he was. No regular driver ever got that cocky about it and he was being a sap, Clancy or no Clancy.

He pulled down and the slower going was torture. One thing was certain. Clancy had passed that way. If he hadn't, there would be plenty of interference and not so much quiet and peace and monotony. As Fogarty had figured, Clancy had taken the interference out—and, being a Double S man with a captured truck, he'd gone through and pulled the gang after him.

The miles rolled by and each one buried a hope; then suddenly the answer dawned. Fogarty stared at the chunky Hortense and cursed.

"We lose, Hortense," he said, "and we deserve to lose. We've been passing crossroads and they never registered on us. Sure. As soon as Mister Bigshot Clancy ran up against some Double S yeggs, he just passed 'em the word to pick up the rest and waltzed himself up on the other highway where he could ride in style. Dammit!"

There was one card left. Clancy might leave the dish-water but the dish-water would never leave Clancy. The man was no brain worker and he'd roll that captured truck right up the main drag of Sixtown as sure as God put oil in the earth. He wouldn't think of anything else to do. He'd want to strut it before the big boss and the odds were

heavy that he'd park it smack in front of the Silver Star.

Jim Fogarty balled the jack for Sixtown and he damned the inherent hell of nitro when he did it.

He didn't take the Tent Town cut-off. He pointed his nose up the main pike and rode it in. The yellow lights of town gleamed. It was 4:30 A. M., the quietest hour that an oil town ever sees; and the crowd was off the drag.

A flivver tried to climb a tree and two walkers pressed hard against the fronts of buildings as the menacing red lights swept down the drag and the bold signs on the side of the truck came into view.

DANGER—EXPLOSIVES

The group in front of the Silver Star did not notice the new arrival immediately. They were engrossed in their own drama. Bob Clancy had stopped for drinks to celebrate his victory and he was gloriously lit—also he was ingloriously anything but a big shot. Wade Tarbell, his thin lips drawn straight beneath the black mustache, had just told him how many kinds of a brainless numskull he was to lay the truck on the doorstep of the one man who didn't want to have anything hung on him. The truck itself stood where Fogarty expected—in front of the Silver Star.

Clancy looked at it and looked back at Tarbell; then he let out a drunken roar and made a lunge at the boss of Sixtown. He got just as far as the booming fist of Toby Janifer, Tarbell's bodyguard, and went down in the dust.

Just then, Fogarty slid out on the off-curb side of the nitro truck. A man who had been rushing across the street stopped short. "For Pete's sake, McGann, are you drunk or something?"

Fogarty hadn't figured that, either, when he swiped the soup truck—that the explosives men were not just truck drivers; they were a select group and their names and routes would be known. It didn't make any difference now, but Fogarty needed a few seconds. He was swinging as he turned and the stranger hit the dirt in back of the red truck as Fogarty walked around it.

In that split second of fist-work, the two men had changed places and Fogarty took up the crossing of the street where the other left off.

It was the tightest spot of Fogarty's life. Every man there was a potential enemy; there was a man on the ground that his fist had felled and there was a truck that he'd stolen. If he could get far enough away from that truck now, there would be a weak case against him, even in a packed court. The truck was in the hands of its owners with contents intact and that eliminated theft as a charge.

The group was aware of the truck now. Clancy was forgotten and they surged forward. Someone saw the man lying on the ground behind it. There were only ten or twelve men in the group and Fogarty skirted them. His brain was clicking at high speed now to keep pace with the thudding of his heart. He sucked air into his lungs and yelled.

"Hey, look out! It's leaking!"

They didn't look at him. They looked at the truck. The thick, greasy gin that Clancy had surrendered so reluctantly to Fogarty was running in a slow stream on the side of the truck and down the running-board. In the pale light that flowed over it, it looked like the hell broth that it wasn't.

For a moment the crowd was paralyzed. If that were nitro that flowed so sluggishly along the running board, there was enough of it to blow truck, crowd and the Silver Star off the face of the earth—and no man was wise enough to say what would or would not touch it off.

Bob Clancy, still dazed, had risen to his feet but he never saw the explosive truck; nor did he sense the sudden drama about him. In his single track mind there was only one idea. He'd been a hero and

he'd brought in the truck that the boss had sent an army of men to stop. He'd been abused and treated shamefully and if they didn't want the truck, he'd take it away again.

He made a sudden dive for the truck which was standing with the engine still humming. Wade Tarbell, himself, was the first to see him and his voice came out in a gust of fear as he contemplated the sudden maneuvering of a truck in the hands of a drunk while nitro dripped.

"Stop him!"

It was Fogarty's cue. He had been behind the crowd with his hat brim pulled down and the knowledge in his soul that any sudden move of his would make him a target. The break was a gift. He turned like a cat and lunged out after the groggy Clancy. His right hand dipped and rose and Clancy went off the running board in a sprawled heap. Fogarty vaulted him and leaped under the wheel.

"Bozo," he said, "I owed you that."

He had the truck in gear before the crowd sensed that he intended to do anything but shut off the engine. With a thrust of the wheel, he came about and he laid the throttle on the floor boards. The old truck snorted and leaped for the road that led south.

CHAPTER VIII

SWITCHED DICE

FOGARTY made no mistake in figuring that he'd be chased. It took only a few minutes before somebody thought to smell the alleged nitro and those few minutes were all the start that the lumbering truck had—plus the time that it took to get cars started and away.

"Right at the second fork. Six miles south and four and a half west."

Fogarty was remembering Woodbury's instructions as he let the truck out for all that it had and fought to hold it on the corduroy road. He boomed past the first fork with white space to spare behind him, but they were pressing him at the second fork and some fool was coming uncomfortably close with a rifle. His muscles cracked as he threw the big truck over and ploughed the whole crossroads with his turn. Careening wildly down a worse road than the one he left, he had a thin enough lead now to hear a scream of brakes when the leading car tried to match his speed on the turn.

It didn't make it and he heard the crash, too, when it turned over in the ditch.

That slowed things and he picked up space again in the next mile, only to have pursuit thunder down on him in the mile following. They were very close now and he knew that he wouldn't make it. The old truck was doing a miracle, but it wasn't enough. The pursuers had even stopped shooting. They didn't have to. He had a mile to go and he couldn't hold the lead for another quarter.

They'd wreck him with the goal in sight.

Then—with the suddeness of thunder—the world seemed to rip apart. There was a rush and a roar on the hill ahead, the beating sound as of giant wings—and a great black towering plume rose up into the dawn.

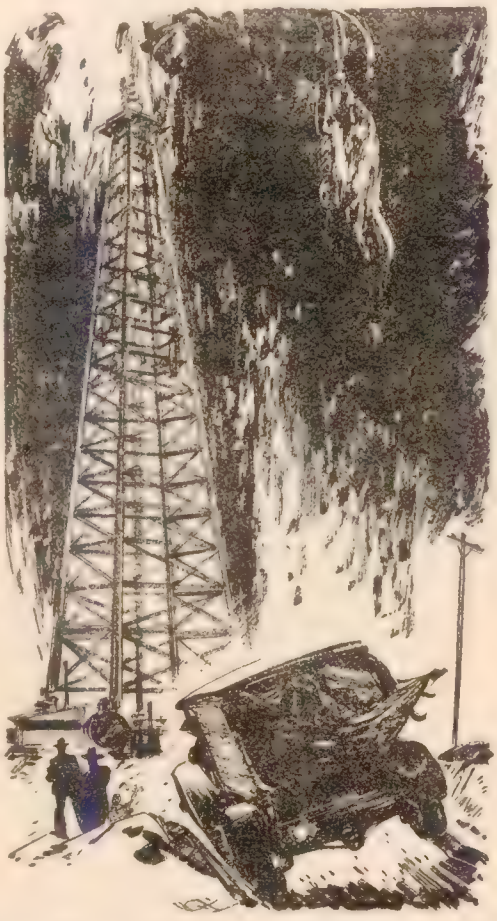
Woodbury Prospect Number One had come in a gusher.

A stone wall across the road could not have wrecked pursuit more completely. The thing that couldn't be true had happened and a shabby tramp with a truck full of tools was suddenly of little importance in the face of Six State Oil's worse defeat. Fogarty laughed deep in his chest and raced on.

He stopped in the road at a safe distance from the well, where his ignition would not constitute a fire hazard, and, as he swung down, Wade Tarbell's

car rolled up. The gambler's eyes were blazing and there was murder in his twisted face, but he was stopped and he knew it.

Sam Woodbury and two of his men were coming down from the roaring well where Hans Larsen battled to valve it down into the storage that had been built in twenty-four hours. There were huskies enough up there with Larsen to wipe up the earth with Tarbell's crowd if the party got rough—and Tarbell knew it. Fogarty ignored him and stepped toward Woodbury. He gestured to the truck.



"Settler," he said, "your truck and your tools per contract."

"What?" Woodbury's gleeful expression gave way to astonishment. Fogarty grinned.

"Right. Twelve hundred bucks worth."

"Twelve hundred?" Woodbury shook himself. "But—"

"I know. You don't need 'em and you never did need 'em." He threw a side glance at Tarbell. "Me, I was just a decoy duck that would probably get himself killed for the hundred bucks which was all that he was ever intended to get. I spotted that idea when you didn't give a hoot about the dish-washer. I figured then that you knew that Tarbell had planted that clumsy bum in your confidential spot and that you were rigging a gag."

Tarbell was staring at Woodbury. "You've been drilling all this time?"

"Sure enough." Woodbury was grinning again. "Got that fish out in three days and been drilling when you figgered we were fishing. Working nights mostly. Last night this feller pulls your interest up north and I bring my storage in from the south. 'Tain't noways complete, but—"

"Yeah! And it's worth every cent of the twelve hundred." Fogarty was grinning. Woodbury stared at him again; then he laughed.

"Sure enough," he said. "It ain't worth it at all, of course, but a bargain's a bargain."

Fogarty shook hands with him and turned to Tarbell.

"Tomorrow," he said, "I'm cashing my paper with you for three thousand seven hundred and fifty bucks. You switched dice on me and I switched trucks on you. That's my two thousand four hundred buck pass and another to boot."

Woodbury was staring at him again. "Another, hell!" he said. "What about my twelve hundred?"

Fogarty winked at Hortense.

"Sure enough," he mocked. "Well, I always did figure I was good for two more passes."

HUROC THE AVENGER

THE corsair who called himself Sidi Hamet was worried, and for good reason. The Sultan, jealous of his wealth, had demanded his daughter's hand. The very idea was a death-blow to Hamet's ambitions. Once in the power of the Turk, he would be his own man no longer. And, being himself English, he took the only way out by going for aid, not to powerful and treacherous allies, but to the only Englishman he could find—paradoxically, a rebellious galley slave, one of his own captives.

A few days after the Sultan's demand, the daughter Mariuma was spirited away from Tripoli in boy's garb, with the slave, who called himself Mister Herrack, at her side. At Genoa the wily Hamet had a ship manned and ready for the fleeing pair.

No sooner had they cleared Gibraltar, however, than pirates dogged their trail.

by GORDON YOUNG

fourth of six parts

Herrack saw that his path to freedom was blocked by the *Maddalena,* captained by Ripaudi, a jackal of the Piombo family of merchant princes. After a fierce encounter Ripaudi's men boarded and scuttled the smaller ship and Herrack and the girl were taken prisoner.

Mariuma saved her escort's life by convincing Ripaudi that her father would pay heavy ransom, and Herrack, because of his part in quelling a mutiny and his obvious mastery of sea craft, was made boatswain's mate.

Had Ripaudi known, the man Herrack was no ally of any Piombos. He had seen his sister sold into slavery by one of that family, had been following a trail of revenge for years, a trail which his capture by Hamet had apparently closed forever.

Now, however, there seemed to be a way out, and a way which would not make him violate his pledge to Sidi Hamet. Herrack incited the *Maddalena's* men to overpower a Spanish galleon, over Ripaudi's protests, hoping to lead them to death. But then something happened which no man could foresee. The

mad attack succeeded—the Spaniard was at their mercy!

CHAPTER XIII

COMMAND

IT was said, but Herrack was not among those who went to look, that three women with dagger wounds in their breasts lay in a rich cabin, where a very old man, with a sword in one hand, a red-dripping dagger in the other, had met the pirates at the door. Two of the women were young and beautiful. The old soldier knew, or devoutly believed, that at such a time God forgives the murder of women.

He was hacked to small pieces by men furious at being cheated.

Herrack went off alone, squatted down with back to capstan, brooded.

Dead men strewed the deck. The devil had taken many men from the pirates as pay for giving them the galleon. They in blood-lust had spared no one, not even the scurvy sick, not even the carpenters of whom they stood in need; not even the slaves, black or red; not a priest.

Now they were mad, utterly mad. They raced over the galleon, in and out of cabins, plundered chests and boxes, broke out cargo, scattered wealth in the feverish seeking for more wealth.

In the midst of senseless yells and howling voices rose a cry for Mariuma. "We are the Moor-maid's men!" They bawled that their officers had been too timorous to fight. They cried that she had given luck, foretold victory!

Those that were already half drunk were no more noisy and insane than those not yet at all drunken. They manned the rigging, clamored for Mariuma like a street mob for some young queen. They called for trumpet blasts and had them, beat the bulwarks with whatever was at hand that made a racket, yelled and kept on yelling.

Lilla came alone on to the *Maddalena's* forecastle, was greeted with screams of applause.

Carlos scrambled up ape-like toward her and others followed. They helped her down the side and to the galleon, where it rode, grappled, under the grinding of the *Maddalena's* junk-shielded bow.

Men called out for her to command them. She moved among the drunken madmen who applauded her. She bore herself aloof and seemed composed but her tawny eyes had a deeply troubled look.

The unclean, splintered deck was red and black. Dead men lay in twisted postures. Scattered here and there were the garments of women.

They cried out for her to speak to them. She looked at the gleeful frenzy in their faces, heard their wild cheers, and knew that if one word was not as they wanted it these madmen might be at her throat. There was much roaring and shouting of curses in bidding one another be silent so she could be heard.

Mariuma called out in a voice that sounded weary, "I am a daughter of the sea!" and that pleased them. She said, "I foretold this great ship was yours for the taking!" They cheered mightily. She said, "You now have wealth, so much that each of you can be a rich man in Zara—"

They made tumultuous acclaim. She stopped, waited. The noise kept up, so she passed on among them as they cheered, flourished their arms, leaped, staggered, howled.

A MOON laid a broad path of silver over the foam-tipped sea.

The two ships, now side to side, rocked together, clashing bends in feeble anger with fenders between them. The *Maddalena* was very small beside the great *Santa Benita*. Sails flapped and shivered. Strained grappling links rattled and hawsers thick as a man's leg creaked as if the ships

pulled pitifully to be free, each of the other, and drift apart, waywardly alone.

Cado Mosto stayed on the *Maddalena,* a lonely, anxious figure. He was pinched with fears of many kinds.

The drunken brutes were damaging and wasting good merchantable stuffs he ached to finger, appraise, and stow with care. A storm might come up, or the galleon's consort, or some sea-rover, and all would be lost. Too, he had some heart-sick fears of what Venice would say, though likely enough if presents were plentiful it would not take much lying to have everything made right. Spain and Venice made large pretense of courtesies, when 'twas known they jealously distrusted and intrigued, each to harm the other. The Piombos were men of influence; the Magnificent of Venice would be pleased. The Venetian faction that fought and hated him would be pleased, too, if they could brand him pirate!

Cado Mosto shivered at the thought. The best he could do about his fears was to pace to and fro and scan the moonlit heavens and sea. Also, being a good Venetian, he prayed a little just to be safe.

On board the galleon men trailed finery, staggering. They were grown too weary and hoarse and drunk to caper and shout. They forgot the *patois* and spoke birth-tongues, as heedless of one another as Babel's workmen.

Herrack sat out on deck. He was hunched over on an overturned chest. Near-by a little earringed Sicilian nodded in confidential murmuring toward the unkempt head of a German who growled a commending *"Ja, Ja,"* and understood not a word. Each had a bottle and poked his bottle at the other's mouth.

Herrack gazed about in weary disgust. Men slept drunkenly in tumbled heaps at the foot of the stairs where they had fallen, snored, muttered, squirmed. From time to time some stirred, looked about in a daze, remembered victory, tried to pull others into wakefulness that they might sing together, found more to drink and soon were again unconscious.

Men lay below hatchways where they had toppled headlong. It would be tomorrow noon before any one could tell whether they were merely drunk or had broken their necks.

The boatswain lay close by; Herrack had dragged him there, had pulled, prodded, slapped, and cursed him without a word of answer. He meant to watch for the boatswain's first stirring, keep wine from him, knock him about if need be and make him sober enough to think and talk. Even with the boatswain's help there would be much to do in seizing and holding command of the ship.

The seizing would be easy enough with a sober man or two. The officers were drinking deep in the Spanish captain's cabin. Old Bellarus was with them, which mattered not at all—the wounded who needed care were also drunk. The Moor slaves had been locked up before the fight and were still locked up. The gunner, who carried his high office lightly, was drunk out on the deck. In his sleep he grinned childlike at the moon, as if amused by the pretty bauble. His grimed body was wrapped in a scarlet cloak. The Dutchman, though no longer an officer, drank with them in the cabin, and Carlos squatted on the deck, among their feet, hiccoughing.

Black Pietro stood before the doorway of the room where Mariuma had withdrawn. His massive arms were folded on his breast. He peered at shadows, gloomily brooding. He was no dog to drink and vomit, lie in a scupper. Too proud for such folly, he was proud to stand on guard like a slave before Mariuma's door.

Jehan, with a slight stagger, picked his way in the moonlight between outthrust feet and scattered loot. He came

to Herrack, stopped, flipped the cloak's end over his shoulder:

"Greetings, pirate!"

"The worst rogue of the lot is almost sober! Why so?"

"For the best of all good reasons, pirate."

"The better to do mischief, eh? What now have you been stealing?"

Jehan pulled the cloak's end off his shoulder, took Herrack's hand, put it to his girdle, patted the hand.

Herrack worked his fingers about a bulging pouch. "Jewels?"

"A work of mercy, pirate. I search the pockets and fingers of shipmates to save their souls."

"Thoughtful knave!"

"They would be put to death, pirate, if they withheld treasure from the common store! In being put to death for stealing they would be thieves, die unshrived, and so damned hellward. So I remove what they have stolen. All churchmen understand such means of saving sinners. Remember, I have been letterman to a bishop!"

"But if you are found out?"

"I'd have the fate befitting such a fool!" said Jehan, roguishly scornful.

"Before the ship gets to port every man is searched and every corner. There's reward, too, for informers."

"Would be an informer, pirate?" Jehan leaned close, reeled a little, grinned wide, whispered: "I have hollowed the leaves of the clasped Galen in Bellarus' room. It lies among other books he never opens for the most excellent reason that he cannot read Latin. And who would think of finding jewels between the pages of a folio? If I fall overboard, pirate, be sure to get your hands on that book!"

"You are drunk. Guard your words. Fortune plays tricks. She is blind but also blinds those she favors!"

"Strange tricks, indeed, pirate. Take here and now. There's a tarry seaman aboard us. A mere titled swabber. To be precise, a sullen boatswain's mate. In one word, yourself. And the most beautiful woman in the world loves you!"

"You lie and call it jesting. I'll throttle you and say it is in sport!"

"I hate fools, pirate."

"If so, go cut your throat!"

"My throat?" Jehan waggled his frail hand before Herrack's face, laughed. "A loathsome breed, liars. I'll not be one. No, pirate. 'Tis only half truth to say she loves you. The whole truth is you love her!"

Herrack spat. "I've a hand that fits your gullet. Keep on."

Jehan pushed his soft palm into Herrack's face, rubbed Herrack's nose. "You'd hang heels down and let your hair be singed before you'd speak an ill word of me to any but myself."

Herrack pushed him away.

Jehan staggered closer.

"My son," he said and tapped Herrack's head with two fingers in the mockery of a blessing. "You'll get but little more out of this voyage than the church, through my humble self, bestows from what sinners have given me. All sinners give unwillingly. 'Tis why they're sinners, so—"

"I get what's mine, or get the heads of them who keep it from me!"

"I'll expound," said Jehan, mocking the posture and tedious drawl of a learned man lecturing. "*Imprimis.* All coined monies, such as are not sequestered by Ripaudi and Cado Mosto, are heaped up and measured at the capstan, fairly as by a banker to his sons. Most like, your share will be two handsful of silver."

Herrack growled.

"Now what of spice and silks? What of Brazil wood, of which this ship is loaded and so precious to dyers of Florence and Venice? What of the great jars of wine? What of merchandise? Can that be parceled? And jewels? Ah, no. A market must be found. That makes delay. When sold, the money is divided into shares—after much delay. Now men

athirst ashore are eager. They clamor to sell out their shares for cash. Cado Mosto and his merchants will accommodate them—with less than a tithing!"

"So that's it?"

" 'T is so!" Jehan was far from drunken but not at all sober. He laid a hand on Herrack's knee, spoke low. "Take warning! Ripaudi is jealous, and—"

"Look here, you wry-tongued rogue. There must be some honest-seeking men among this crew not wholly drunk. I've pawed them over, found all I'd trust stone drunk and hard to wake as dead men. But name me ten, even five—five that can be used. We'll take the *Maddalena* and leave this galleon to the men that hug her deck! There's myself and you—that's two. And the drunken boatswain there. When sober, he'll be three! Find me two more!"

"God found fewer in Gomorrah, a holy place beside a pirate's deck!"

"The more reason for leaving it."

"And take her, of course?"

"I'm oath-bound till she's safe in England."

"Ah, think you that she will ever be safe on this earth? Not till she is age-withered. Great beauty and great jewels know no security. Man-like, you would choose her perishable beauty above all jewels!"

"You'll see!" Herrack growled.

"If I go with you and her to England? No. I'll not go. I've no love of fog and dank air. If ever I'm to be hanged, may it not be on a gallows in such a bleak, wet land. No, I'll not help you play the fool." He teetered near. There was the odor of wine on his mouth. "The best that you can do is

take a cloak, get in a corner and sleep. 'T will be three days before these men are sober. I have seen them drunk a week on Dutch beer and salt herring as their ship lay tossing with no watch kept."

Herrack laid hold on him. "One thing. See here. When I give orders 't is best to do as told. Why did you not come with her on board this galleon as I said?"

"For the best of all good reasons, pirate." He made a mock of humbly explaining. "This galleon in a twinkling was so shattered that our own deck was safer for voyaging. But I spoke to her and stood well off or would have been well scratched. She is a woman and hates truth!"

"What truth?"

"I said to her, 'You love him!'"

"And lied!"

"Oh no, 't was she who lied in saying that I lied. She flamed avowal in the anger of denial. 'Tis the woman-way. You would like right now to go talk with her. Don't try. I did. I lie better than you and Black Pietro loves me more. But she has told him she is ill, would sleep, and none must awaken her."

"She doesn't sleep."

"Nor does Peter. A noble fellow, but commits one sin that is without pardon on earth and I hope in heaven. 'T is never to laugh. I've heard the Turks made him a eunuch in a captive childhood. If so, what man would ever laugh? Would you?"

Jehan, laughing, flipped up the cloak's end, drew it about his neck and moved off, not steady on his feet.

THE air grew chilly as if the moon's light were cold.

Herrack got up, picked a cloak from the deck, shook it out, wrapped himself and sat down on deck with his back to the bottom of the overturned chest, gazed overhead into the raffle-tangle outlined against the bright sky. There was no hope of sleep or rest, so he studied the future.

If he seized the *Maddalena* and reached England there would be a pest of meddlesome questions from officials.

If he did not seize the *Maddalena* she would return to Zara, himself as sailing master. Within a day's sail northward of Zara lay Croatian islands, where Uskobs lurked, unceasingly watchful. By passing Zara and reaching those islands, the Piombos would be cheated of their ship and loot, he would be among friends, and it would never be known in Zara, Venice or Constantinople that Sidi Hamet had buried an empty coffin to cheat the Sultan.

Herrack arose, threw down the cloak and started forward. His foot struck against the boatswain's leg. He stooped, shook hard, spoke, had no answer.

He dragged the boatswain to one side, more nearly behind the chest, spread the cloak well over the drunken body, and went forward.

Up by the forecastle he took a bucket on a line, flung it overboard, drew up salt water and washed himself.

The galleon surged and tossed with mournful creak of broken rigging. 'Twas like the great ship's heartsick complaint of her disaster. In the darkness under the forecastle somebody was vomiting. Aloft on the forecastle a man sang.

A pistol shot was heard from somewhere along the deck, well aft.

Herrack looked back and had the indistinct impression of a big-girthed shadow vanishing into the deeper shadows under the quarterdeck. A few thick voices called out, sluggishly startled. The drunken singer on the forecastle stopped, then went on. The sick man under the forecastle did not pause.

Herrack looked about until he found a man, dead or drunk, who had put on a fine linen shirt from among the loot. Herrack tore it off the fellow, ripped away sleeves and ruffles, made a pad that he soused in salt water, and sopped

his cuts and bruises, the better to keep away soreness.

He went back along the deck. Over and over he said to himself, "A mad world, my masters!" for no more of a reason than that the phrase had got caught in his mind like sheep's wool on a thorn and hung there.

He sat on the chest, gazed at the sea, looked overhead, moved his foot. His foot slipped greasily in a slime-like smear.

He leaned down, touched fresh blood with his fingers. Herrack felt of the cloak. It was heavy with blood. He pulled the cloak away.

A pistol had been fired through the cloak into Boatswain Locke's head.

"So? I lay down first with the cloak about me. Perhaps some one watched, then went away until I would have time to fall asleep. Perhaps he saw me move the boatswain and cover him. It matters not at all whether he meant to kill the boatswain or kill me!"

Herrack drew his cutlass, felt of the edge, and walked aft. Men lay in various places about the deck. Now and then he pricked a body with the point, sharply. Some stirred or muttered, but no one popped up, awake.

A hopeless search, but there was no better way to spend the night.

Herrack took a lantern from its peg and under the light looked more carefully at men's faces. He saw a pistol in a man's sash, drew it out, sniffed. There was no fresh smell of burned powder. Pistols were valuable. He carefully restored it to the drunken man's sash and went on.

In the passageway he came face to face with black Pietro, his arms folded across his massive breast, the two-handed sword at his belt.

"Has a man passed since that pistol was fired, my friend?"

Pietro in his solemn-slow way looked at the lantern, at the cutlass, at Herrack's face and said, "No."

"It is well, my friend, to keep watch with your back to the door. If you are killed, you may then at least know the man's name."

Herrack went on. He looked into cabin after cabin. In some candles burned and threw a glower over the havoc of pillage. All things that could be moved had been overturned, pawed and re-pawed in the thievish rummaging. He carefully put out candles. If overturned they might cause fire.

He found Jehan cuddled like a weary child on the deck. Herrack felt about Jehan's girdle, cut loose with the cutlass edge the heavy cords that held the lump-filled pouch. He put it down inside his own breeches.

"Little rogue," Herrack muttered, "I half believe there is more honesty in you than in half the world's honest men. I'm a good thief, too. You'll see!"

HERRACK heard loud voices in the Spanish captain's great cabin that opened to the topmost stern balcony. Through the doorway he saw shadows flutter in the light.

He, as every shipman should be, was careful at all times of fire hazard; and, there being no ready place to hang the lantern beyond kick of stumbling feet, he put it out and set it down, then moved forward with stealth.

Here were, if not sober men, at least men not wholly drunken. He listened long in the hope that some one might speak of his death or the boatswain's.

Bellarus sang noisily in bad Latin of how angels had come upon an old churchly drunkard at death in a tavern and tenderly prayed God's mercy for him.

There were lesser voices and confused murmurings; no words were distinct.

Herrack straightened, stepped nearer, silently stood in the doorway. Darkness was behind him and the light of many candles that swayed in a great cande-

labra was upon his face; but at first he was unnoticed.

Bellarus rocked to and fro in a broad chair; in one hand he held a large silver cup. His gray beard was soppy with spilled wine, red as blood.

Carlos, but half awake, sat cross-legged on the deck and dribbled red foam from a brimming flagon that was nearly as big as his head.

A huge brown earthen pot of wine, as wide as a tub and half as tall as a man, was out in the middle of the deck and men dipped into it at will.

The apple-faced Dutchman straddled a bench. He growled and hiccoughed into a mug and splattered his drink over himself when he struck the mug against his fat breast to give emphasis to some muddled oath. There was a pale look to his round face, which was strange, for he was reddishly brown when sober. His little blue eyes winked out of fat cheek like unripe grapes deep in dough.

Ripaudi lay half asleep on a pile of cushions banked under the canopy of the bed. He had cleaned himself of grime and stains, put on dead men's finery. His lids were adroop like a gorged hawk's. The drooping lids twitched wide when he saw Herrack. Ripaudi leaned forward, pushed the Dutchman's head around.

The Dutchman gave a fuddled look. His pale eyes jumped in their sockets and he dropped his jaw. A howl came from the open mouth. The mug clattered out of his hand, struck the bench, fell, and was shattered on the deck. He dragged his foot across the bench as he rose up in awkward sway of fright. "Ghost! His ghost!" He tottered back with loose jaw trembling; back until his round rump bumped against the carved paneling of the bulkhead.

"Ghost?" Carlos mumbled and swung out his brimming flagon, muttered something about giving the ghost a drink. He peered about with idiot look, seeking the poor ghost and took no notice of Herrack's earth-solid body. Thereby Herrack knew there had been no talk of his death.

Ripaudi raised himself on an elbow. His look was black and one eye squinted. He seemed on guard.

Herrack held the cutlass' point up, the blade at a slant across his breast, and moved toward the terrified Dutchman. Bellarus in noisy fellowship rose out of his chair, clutched at Herrack's arm, thrust the wine-dripping cup at Herrack's mouth. Cup and fat old slobberer were knocked over with a side sweep of arm. Bellarus floundered and blubbered on the deck.

Ripaudi spoke with a hissing sound. "You glower like a death's head!"

"And am!" said Herrack with no look aside. He strode forward.

The terrified Dutchman was huddled into the shelter of a tall oaken press, deeply carved with heraldic emblems.

Herrack seized him by the throat, spun him about, shoved him out into the room. The Dutchman howled and was falling prayerfully to his knees as Herrack heaved up the cutlass and struck. The man fell with a wide-split skull.

STARTLED cries sank into half-heard gasps, and drunken men were a little sobered. They had seen hundreds die that day and helped joyously to kill them. The silent, straight-forward purposefulness of this execution filled them with a kind of awe. Eyes turned on Ripaudi. They expected that he would come off his cushions in a frenzy with drawn sword.

Herrack faced him and Ripaudi did not move.

"Why, Ripaudi, did you nudge this man when I shoved in the door?"

For the space it takes to draw two long breaths Ripaudi was motionless. One eye was set in a tight squint, the other blazingly wide. Then lips twitched, white teeth gleamed: "He was full of boasts of what he would say and how

he'd fight when he saw you again." Other words followed in a velvet-soft tone: "I thought it well to show him you had come." There was a widening of the lip-smile, more glint of white sharp teeth: "Why did you kill him? He was drunken. Helpless. No fights between comrades are allowed at sea. 'Tis ship-law that when one man kills another he must die!"

The cutlass point lowered, touched the dead man. "And so he did!"

"What do you mean?"

"Had he not thought me dead, would he have thought me ghost?"

"You give a riddle." Ripaudi was still smiling but his words had an edge.

"Then hear the answer! The boatswain was pistoled as he lay under my cloak, where I but a little while before had lain!" Herrack swung the cutlass in a side stroke, scoring the words: "No man evades justice because he is drunk! Or unarmed! Or a coward and will not fight! Do you say I did wrong?"

The drunken Carlos threw aside his flagon, belched and roared, "No!" He arose in ape-like shambling stagger, waved his long arms, howled, "No! Who says 'twas wrong? Where's my ax?" Carlos prowled about drunkenly, looking for his ax and did not find it.

Other men quickly said, "'Twas right!" "Well done!" "Good!"

Ripaudi leaned forward, fingered his beard, looked at the Dutchman, mused aloud:

"He went out and came back many times tonight. A pistol? That is his pistol under the bench. 'Twas primed. I saw him prime it. He said some lurking Spaniard might spring out to kill as he could before he was killed. And now—" Ripaudi caught up the pistol. "It has been fired! Treachery! Fling the dog into the sea!"

Men gathered about on unsteady legs and tumbled their burden over the gilded balcony rail. They surged back with hurried, teetering trample and looked about for mugs and cups, reeled at the brim of the tall tub-like wine pot, looked about for Herrack, but he had gone.

When Jehan awakened it was mid-morning. He had a woeful ache through the temples and his mouth was dry as burnt wool. He raised to an elbow in muddled staring, all a-wonder to be on his own couch, full dressed.

He rose from the bed, tottered to the Venetian mirror framed on the bulkhead. His young cheeks looked ashen, his curls tangled. He yawned. His hand fell and half by chance fumbled at the cut cords of the pouch that had been at his girdle.

Jehan fingered the clean-cut cord ends and swore in a way to have crinkled a pirate's ears. He remembered that he had confided tipsily in Herrack. Any man might have cut the pouch. But were his other hidden jewels in the Galen? If they were gone also, then this Herrack was just another man like all others.

He pulled out the ponderous Galen, undid the clasps, opened it. In the casket of hollowed pages lay coins, rings, jewels filched and pilfered as chance offered, and also the pouch.

CHAPTER XIV

NAKED STEEL

IT WAS full three days before the pirates got far enough from the wine jars to be called sober. They awakened gaunt-eyed, bad-tempered, with sour bellies, and were fretfully alarmed at having been so folly-struck as to lie helpless before any ship that might chance to come upon them.

Once there had been a strong ship's company of nearly three hundred men, now there were not half that number. Some, with trivial wounds, had bled to death while drunk. Some, perhaps, were still merely drunk when pitched overboard by shipmates, fiercely eager to have all work done so they could the sooner escape with this great wealth.

They struggled with the purposeful swarming of ants to heave up the great burnt ingots of gold; and, knowing its value to the dyers of Italy, the corded quebracho wood on canvas slings. Great chests were stuffed full of whatever came to hand and trampled in by feet to make more room. There were iron-bound boxes filled with coins. They gathered much rich armor and fine clothing, firearms, Spanish swords, and many jewels.

Their heads ached with the debauch but they heartened one another with promises of longer debauches when again at Zara.

They gutted the galleon, set a powder train, laid a slow match and were a mile away when the galleon was sheeted with flames and the roar reached them.

Thus the *Santa Benita* perished from the sea.

Mariuma continued to seclude herself. She was ill, or so she said. Old Bellarus visited her every day. Bribed, infatuated, or merely deceived, he came out solemnly, talked of humors, vapors, fevers, shook his head with downcast face.

Ripaudi, with Carlos and Pietro, entered her cabin together. They found her abed, listless, with staring eyes. She smiled and spoke softly. "I am weary. That is all." She put out a pretty hand from under the covers as if to see what they would do with it.

Pietro crossed himself and dropped knees down, her hand to his lips.

Squat Carlos stood upright, scarcely taller than Pietro on his knees.

"My lady, do not die!" the dwarfed giant begged. He had the look of a bandog sorrowing at the bedside of a sick mistress.

Impulsive Ripaudi clasped her hand. His black eyes burned. She knew he loved her.

Word passed through the ship that she was near death. The crew must know two or three times a day how she did. Now and then rumor jumped among them telling that she had died. Men would not be satisfied until some chosen few were permitted to enter her room. They bobbed their ugly heads and with voices hoarse from much drink and loud yelping said, "We are your men!" Mariuma's lingering look thanked them simply.

Jehan, near Herrack in the midnight watch, commended, "Tut! She is not ill, but wise."

"Wise? Ho! If she did precisely what God said to do, she'd somehow make folly of it!"

"No. These cutthroats cheer as at a miracle when she appears on deck. But if she appeared at every turn of the hour glass, would they cheer? She makes a mystery of herself and calls it sickness."

Herrack turned his gaze to windward. "Why not call it fear?"

"More nearly magic—as she claimed for herself! You are a fool to doubt! A maid alone on this ship, with a face to lure Saint Anthony—and yet unmolested? That, pirate, is sorcery!"

Crew and officers had dread of Herrack. He was a bitter master, would have gear ship-shape, made soldiers keep clear of the deck passageways, and broke two boatswains before he found a third that seemed fit.

He meted punishment without troubling Ripaudi; had lazy men whipped, back-talkers ducked, one fellow keelhauled, and warned more. Men cursed

him fearfully, but always in low voices so he would not hear.

When Jehan warned him, Herrack said:

"Ashore they'll make proud boasts of what a devil they had for master. Women and seamen are alike. Both try to find what weakness is in the master; but when their backs are welted they are happy not to be ruled by a weakling!"

The *Maddalena* won into the Mediterranean and sailed at night with no lights showing. Never was an honest ship more afraid of a strange sail than these pirates.

"We run and dodge," said Jehan, "like a purse-heavy merchant in a dark street from every shadow. I'll make the wager it was no honest man, but loot-laden thieves such as we, who first said God said, 'Thou shalt not steal!' "

They stood in near the old ruined town of Golchis at Sardinia for wood and water and almost made mutinous refusal of the orders to careen and clean the hull.

The boatswain reported to Herrack, "It were well not to force their stubbornness."

Cado Mosto kept a very quiet lip around Herrack, but ventured, "We must humor them and have no violence."

Ripaudi sneered behind a pleasant grin, "What matter whether we lose days on the beach cleaning the hull or by sailing more slowly because the hull is not cleaned?"

The one-eyed French gunner said, " 'Twere a shame to force men to lose their lives in mutiny when we are all now so near the girls of Zara and the taverns! But, by God, though my one eye weep to put a match to powder, I am your man!"

Jehan whispered, "Be wary! Ripaudi and Cado Mosto are so near to Zara they will not be sorry to see you have ill luck!"

Herrark had the trumpets sounded and the boatswain and his mates piped shrilly. The ship's company was summoned into the waist.

Herrack faced them from the quarterdeck. The bottom, he said, was grassy and dragged. Being loot-laden, he said, they sought to avoid Moors and corsairs; therefore fast sailing was needful. The bottom must be breamed.

"So," he said, "with the next tide the ship will be hauled far up the beach. Break out tar, sulphur and tallow. I'll kill the man who says one word against it! To your quarters and make ready."

A hush fell, then a murmur began to grow like the coming of a high wind, and voices rose in cheers. The old gunner slapped his leg and chattered applause. Swore by God he had sailed with many masters, never the equal of Monsieur Herrack. From that hour he called Herrack *Monsieur*. It was his greatest compliment.

At high tide, with sweeps and boats ahead, they drew the *Maddalena* far up on the sand and began to cut and pile brush. The sea grass on the hull must be scorched and burned to scrape more easily. Herrack, ashore, moved among them, directed the work.

"What," Jehan asked, "if they had jumped upon your back until their weight bore you to the ground?"

"Nothing more than that many would have died before I did."

THEY rounded Sicily to avoid the Messina Straits. Herrack was almost tempted by the mad impulse to drive by Malta and go straight into Tripoli. He did half expect an ironic fate would pitch Sidi Hamet's galleys against him.

Twice Moor galleys were sighted and men cried out to make all sail and flee. Herrack had not rowed under the *Renegado* without learning much. He set all sail, manned bulwarks and rigging, thrust out the *Maddalena's* guns, made for the galleys.

They, thinking no ship worth plundering if it did not flee, rowed off.

The *Maddalena* turned northward, kept close to the Italian coast.

One day a great Venetian ship bore toward them. 'Twas the Venetians' jealous way to overhaul and question ships as if the whole Adriatic was, as Venice claimed, her private ocean.

Then the clean hull had its value. Herrack stood away. Night came; he changed his course, put out all lights, and the Venetian was lost.

Jehan chattered. "These Venetians can scarce forgive Almighty God his blunder in making the world round instead of keeping it flat, as 'twas till some hundred years ago. The new trade routes bleed Venice. She feels herself robbed by Spain, Portugal, England. And to make her trade troubles worse, of late years the hideous Uskobs war openly on Venice —even proud Venice!"

"Uskobs?" Herrack had the tone of a man curious to learn.

"Ferocious mountain men who have taken to the sea. They eat the hearts of those killed in battle! An Englishman, 'tis said, is sea-captain among them. A huge giant. More beast than man. His teeth stick out from his lips like a boar's. Venice, 'tis said, offers fifty thousand ducats for his head!"

"A great sum," said Herrack.

"A paltry sum," said Jehan. "One ship is worth more and he has taken many."

"You are thief enough to find favor with so great a rogue!"

He followed Herrack into a room where a chart was spread on a table and as Herrack leaned forward with ruler and pencil, Jehan poked a slim finger down in midst of northward islands.

"Here is the home and haunt of Uskobs. All up here about the Quarnerolo."

"Why, 'tis very near Zara!"

"So near Venetian galleys keep watch at sea."

"Do they, indeed?"

"And have far more fear of that Huroc than of the devil!"

"Why, lad, from what I know of men, I'd say this Huroc was a great coward. Fights merchantmen. Be sure of it, he prowls and pounces only when he has advantage. A common pirate. Most likely limps behind his boarders, but claims the biggest loot. If ever he is gibbeted in Venice, I'll be there!"

Some time later there came such a windy, rain-swept night that the *Maddalena* got off her course. In the murky dawn land was seen close on board, and nearly half the ship's company recognized the landmark, knew they were within two days of Zara.

The best Herrack could do was smile grimly, shrug a shoulder, hope for a storm, so that he could plausibly take the ship out of sight of land and boggle the reckoning; but the most tranquil of balmy weather blew them along.

ZARA was at hand. Tomorrow by late evening the crew would be ashore.

It being well known there was not an honest man on board the *Maddalena,* the morrow was set as a day for search. Carlos' ax would take off the arm of any man found to have secreted loot from shipmates.

Cado Mosto was a thrifty man. He knew that in the midst of victory men stole loot, pocketed precious gems, hid them in rags and leather tied next the skin; but as the hour for search drew near they would think twice, grow fearful, repent them as the guilty do when afraid of detection. To be rid of the stuff 'twas likely jewels and gold would be flung furtively overboard, to the great loss of owners and ship-sharers.

It was his plan that hung a wide-mouthed sack near the scuttle butt and left it there all the night before, so that any man might secretly drop in his purloined treasure. The next morning there was a small sprinkling of jewels, rings, necklaces, and gold trinkets in the sack.

The crew chose searchers from among their numbers. Later they would in turn

be searched by other men. They began in the bows, went into every corner, shook every rag, and being great thieves themselves knew best where to look. No man was permitted to cross back into the searched area until himself searched. It was done with great merriment and jesting, but done thoroughly.

No man escaped search but Cado Mosto and Ripaudi, no quarters but theirs and, of course, Mariuma's. The crew muttered that the biggest thieves of the ship had sanctuary, but let it pass with mutters.

Herrack knew how ill-loved he was, so quietly searched his own quarters, found fine jewels in the mattress. They had been put there since he lay asleep. The more and finer the jewels the greater would be ship-wrath.

Herrack grinned, murmured, "I thank you, Signior Cado Mosto!" He pocketed the jewels, gave them secretly to Jehan, who ran gleefully to Bellarus' Galen.

Searchers came to Herrack's quarters.

They pawed, pried and poked, craned necks, skinned their knees, researched the same corners, blankets, mattress like dogs that smell where meat has been; found nothing and went off reluctant.

Ripaudi bit his nails, pulled at his black beard, glared with one eye asquint, the other wide. Cado Mosto looked down his nose, had a sickly air of having dined off bad shellfish, breathed as if he had a pain in his chest.

Herrack thrust fingertips into his beard and spoke confidentially into both their ears at once:

"Some rogue that wished me ill put jewels in my mattress. I found them this morning, all too late to stow in the sack. What better to do than heave them overboard A great loss, for they were beautiful. Now that we are near Zara and my navigator's craft is unneeded, some evil-smelling coward played the foul trick. It pains me that I should not be well thought of."

Booming guns flashed in the twilight as the *Maddalena* moved through the long channel. They echoed over the water and among the old houses of the hilly town.

The great banner of the ship was hoisted aloft with cheery cries. Men scrambled in the rigging to wave the towering, ancient fortress on the bleak promontory where black dots, no bigger than flies, appeared on parapets against the evening's flush of sky.

By the time the ship had come abreast of the fortress it was night. The great cage-like cressets were hung out, filled with naphtha and lighted. Flames hissed and swayed in the wind, cast a fierce glare upward, deepened the shadows about the spar deck. The *Maddalena* was signaling a gala homecoming to arouse the town.

All the ship's company had a fretful eagerness to be ashore. They milled about on the forecastle and crowded the lower forward rigging to point at the town's far off lights, name wine shops, girls, and boast of the long ease and rest they would take from the sea.

A pilot had come on board.

Herrack chose to be alone in shadows for a time, the better to think. He went down into the darkness of the overhanging quarterdeck and watched the town's lights without even noticing that he watched them.

He roused himself with sudden turn of body. He could not have told what warned him, but as he turned a shimmer of steel flashed where his back had been.

He caught the assassin's wrist in a twisting grip. His other hand fastened the crotch between thumb and fingers on the fellow's gullet, smothering the frighted cry. The dagger fell. The assassin clawed with both hands to free his throat, but Herrack squeezed and shook.

When the wavering dip of a cresset flare gave him a fair look at the man's face. Herrack scarcely knew the dark, long-bodied, evil-eyed soldier.

"Why me?" Herrack loosened his fingers a little to have an answer.

The fellow wheezed, coughed, gulped, then jerked in a fierce struggle to get free. Herrack shook as a dog does to set his teeth deeper, then swept him off the deck, smashed him up against a stanchion.

"Now some truth or you go overboard with a broken neck!"

"The—the captain!"

"Ripaudi?"

"Oh, mercy, in God's name!"

"Why he?"

"I know not!"

"If you like being choked as I like doing it, we're having pleasant sport. What reason, fellow?"

"As God hears me, he gave none!"

"He said something. What?"

"Nothing. By the Holy Virgin I swear it."

The heel of Herrack's palm struck a rasping blow up along the fellow's cheek.

"Don't—oh, don't! He sent for me and promised me his friendship for a favor. Slight favor, he said. He promised that next voyage I would berth aft and be an officer. Said he chose me out of liking. Gave me the dagger, named you! Said when 'twas done he would have a present for me. He fingered jewels and—"

"When was this?"

"Yesterday. It must be done, he said, before you got ashore. An hour ago he sent for me again and was angered that—"

Herrack held the fellow's wrist and stooped, picked up the dagger. The man drew back, begging.

"Within an hour this crew will be ashore and scattered through the town. You can go too if—here, I'll prick my finger! Now take this dagger, go to him, be truthful and say my blood is on the blade! Get your jewels. Before he finds I am not dead you can be ashore." Herrack pricked a finger, mocked the man. "See how careful I am of your soul? I would not have you lie! Now go, and if you boggle it you will never get ashore, not even for burial!"

The fellow took the knife, hid it in his bosom, mounted the ladder, went on up to the poop.

Herrack went out on the deck where he could watch.

Cresset flames cast a whirling glare. He could see two shapes meet. One was Ripaudi's cloaked figure. Their hands touched, exchanging something. Ripaudi flung his arm and the dagger flashed through a gleam of light, fell astern.

The fellow came off the poop, and on down to the spar deck. As his foot came off the last ladder step Herrack caught him by the shoulder:

"I'd see how much my death is valued!"

The man gave over a pouch of soft fine leather.

"You told him I was dead?"

"Dead!"

"My body?"

"Overboard."

"Good." Herrack pocketed the pouch. "'Tis very wrong that you should have reward for service undone! I'll buy prayers for you in your name—what is your name?"

"Georgius."

"'Twill be talked of in Heaven—the money Georgius had for a murder he did not do, he gave to charity! Now get forward and be the first ashore, or when he finds I am not dead you soon will be! But if you are, don't worry. I will have bought prayers for your soul! Go!"

Herrack gave a shove that helped Georgius on his way.

CHAPTER XV

CAPTAIN-MAKER

THE *Maddalena* came to anchor in the midst of a shoal of small boats. Only a vessel deep-laden with wealth would make such a gala entry. Bullies and their

girls, gamesters, penniless bravos, sailors, innkeepers, fishermen and fishwives, all the hiving of waterfront and beggardom came with cheers and coaxing laughter.

The entry port was opened, the ladder let down, and in the midst of them came a long-cloaked, well-bellied merchant with some fat companions and a serving man. The fat merchant had a waddle in his walk, much gray in beard and hair, a velvet cap that was puffed at the crown, and a gold chain about his neck. His eyebrows were shaggy, his nose thick, his small eyes sparkled. His mouth was opening and closing but words were lost in the clamor.

Herrack drew back with deepening scowl. He did not want to be seen by old Piombo.

Very likely the ship's officers would be called up and congratulated by Piombo and those who had owners' share in the ship with him.

Herrack started forward, but turned abruptly and made for Bellarus' cabin. He had in a twinkling decided to leave the ship, confirm Ripaudi's belief that he was dead, avoid Piombo, somehow make arrangements for a message to Sidi Hamet, then play the game as fortune might throw the dice.

The cabin was empty—and so was the Galen.

Herrack shrugged a shoulder, not wholly doubting Jehan's honesty. The hiding place was his, his the right to transfer what was hidden. There had been no understanding between them about a time for dividing.

Herrack went to the upperdeck passageway. He hoped to catch sight of Jehan. He saw Cado Mosto hurry from his small cabin as if sent for. He had the eagerness of an agent who expected high commendation from his ship owner.

Inside Cado Mosto's cabin Herrack tumbled things about, and quickly found a heavy iron-bound strong box about two spans long, one span wide and high. He caught up a fine cloak, threw it about his shoulders, put the strong box under his arm and left with an air of being about proper business.

He got a candle and, not lighting it, went to the lower gun deck. No one was in sight. Crew, company and officers were all on the upper decks. Voices, laughter, cheers, the general hubbub, reached him.

He lit the candle, got a cannon ball, dropped it twice with all his force and shattered the iron-bound box. Then he shook out gold pieces. There were ten times more than he could carry about him. He had no greed beyond a comforting supply of money and laughed to picture Cado Mosto's rage, the glee of some surprised sailor who would find the treasure.

On deck he cut off the cloak, folded it about the cutlass and made a loop to swing it over his shoulder. Arms were not permitted on the streets of Zara. Zara, like Venice, was cluttered with desperate, quarrelsome bravos.

Herrack went to the ship's side, looked down at the joggling small craft astir on the black water. Some were fisher boats and a few were gondolas. Zara in her nearly landlocked harbor somewhat imitated her Mistress Venice.

Herrack took a rope in hand, swung overboard, lowered himself and got into the empty boat where his foot touched. He loosened the painter, took up an oar, rowed toward lights on the distant quay.

There was nothing better he could do until after Mariuma had been gaped at, talked with, brought ashore, where most likely she would be put in Piombo's house and cared for like a princess.

He passed tall-masted fishing boats at their moorings. The furled sails were great blotches of red and yellow in the occasional flicker of light. Now and then a voice hailed, asking eagerly if he came from the *Maddalena*, but he did not answer.

The landing was brightly lighted by

flambeaux set in rings against stone pillars. They had been placed there as beacons by near-by tavern keepers; and men of the taverns stood by with great mugs in their hands to offer seamen a sample-sip of rich strong wine, then point the way to where it was sold.

Seamen who had roamed the world never lost their child-like trust that perhaps this time sample and purchase would be from the same cask.

He drew near to the wide stone steps that led down into the water and soon became aware of angry words between a stout-shouldered waterman and a tall young fellow in crimson doublet and hose, who had some three or four companions and servants about him.

A big gondola with arched cabin lay at the foot of the water steps.

Herrack rowed up, avoided the gondola, stepped out near the quay wall, made the boat fast and would have gone his way but that he heard the waterman's words:

"I tell you my gondola awaits Donna Magda!"

The tall young man in crimson hose demanded, "Must a citizen give place to a common strumpet?"

"Though she be what you say," the waterman replied with respect but no humbleness, "she is also a citizen of Zara. She sent to engage my gondola and I await her. No one may have it against her will, except by order of Count Grimani himself!"

"Pah, that for your Count Grimani!" the young man in crimson snapped thumb and finger under the waterman's nose, then drew himself up, tossed his head. "Do you not know *me?*"

"Indeed, Messer Agnolo Piombo, and have often served your father and uncle!"

"But will not serve *me?* Come. You can have us to the ship and be back quickly. If the strumpet comes, she can wait!"

"Donna Magda has engaged me, sir."

Young Agnolo called her bad names and fidgetted. "I must to that ship! It is my father's and he is there, awaits my coming and—"

"There are fisher boats for hire," said the gondolier.

"A pest to talking!" said a crook-nosed companion, many years Agnolo's elder. "Let us on board, and whether or not

this rascal takes us, we go! And in his gondola!"

Crook-nose and Agnolo pushed forward. The gondolier made to check them, protested against such lawlessness. His companion on the bow pled earnestly, but Agnolo's serving men mocked him. The gondoliers were loth to use force against gentlemen but stood and resisted as much as they could without striking. Some one tripped the big gondolier and there was laughter as he slipped asprawl.

Crook-nose and Agnolo were hunched to stoop and enter the gondola when their servants were scattered like ninepins and a rough hand caught at their own shoulders, jerked them back.

"Wrath of God!" said Herrack. "Fair words and a respectful manner you've had! Now have something that will give you understanding!"

He put his fist so hard into Agnolo Piombo's face that the young fop went down and slid on the worn wet stones. He flopped off the last step into the water.

Herrack's cutlass, wrapped in the cloak, was a-dangle on his shoulder. Being barefoot, his toes' grip on the wet stones was solid. He tumbled the serving men over with fists as easily as if slapping flies.

Crook-nose threw back his short cloak, snatched deep in a girdle fold; his closed fist was spiked with a dagger blade. Its glint in the link light brought anxious warnings and gasps from the waterfront folk. Crook-nose squawked a curse, rushed, struck.

Herrack stepped aside. The blow missed and Herrack's hand darted as a falcon strikes, seized the wrist and jerked it down against a lifted knee.

The wrist snapped, the hand dangled, the dagger clicked on the stones. Crook-nose's howl of pain blended with his yell of terror as Herrack caught him by crotch and by neck, heaved him up to arm's length overhead, took a step forward and threw him headlong. Crook-nose's cloak flared out like useless wings.

There was high splash of water. The waterfront folk cheered and laughed. Zaratines, often rebellious and always reconquered, did not love Venetians and they were pleased to see the lordly fops so boldly pitched about. Girls in colored kirtles and caps, with hair in long braids and ribbands streaming, jumped up and down and clapped their hands. The men of the sea, fishers and smugglers, grinned and gabbled.

THE splashing of Ser Crook-nose threw the water high and it came down in dollops over the stone landing.

A good-humored voice said, "If you had wet me through any other cause than the bathing of that dotterel, who has much need of cleansing, I would show you what an angered woman can do!"

Herrack faced Donna Magda under the flaring light of her two link boys.

Magda was a full-breasted girl with large dark eyes and the tawny face of a young gypsy. Common folk forgave all her sins because she was one of them and did not wear the airs of a fine lady, though she wore garments as costly as the finest. She greeted old friends in the streets and made new ones. Her purse's mouth was always open. When she passed there was more curtsying and bowing under doffed caps with "Mary bless you!" than for another personage in the town.

Withal, Magda was shrewd and knew men, although her wayward impulses oft tumbled her judgment. When Herrack turned and she saw his face in the link light she caught her breath. He was tall, broad, as many a burly sailor might be; and being not at all drunken, was exceedingly bold to pitch rich young men into the water. She narrowed her look a little in a kind of pleased puzzlement. This man, in spite of his rough dress, was not a mere seaman. There was a

casual look of more than physical strength about him, of power to command, make his way. She, more readily than most, could tell a man's caste without studying his clothes. Besides, she thought him handsome.

The gondolier rubbed at an elbow and angrily tried to tell what happened. A tavern host, with apron before his big belly and the end of a tasseled red cap flying about as he used his head for emphasis, tried to tell what happened. A dozen other voices as well, one higher than another, tried so fast and shrill to tell Magda what happened that she could understand none.

"Who are you?" Her voice was as rich as a voice could be.

Herrack looked at her and laughed. "A seaman, Donna Magda!" He thrust out his hands, showing her that they were knotted with callouses and still tar-stained. "Off that *Maddalena*. If what men tell is true, I've followed your image across two seas like a faithful dog!"

"Faithful? A man be faithful?" Her teasing had a merry composure.

Agnolo Piombo was drawn from the water, coughing and shivering, all huddled and shamed under gleeful taunts. Crook-nose, when he was dragged out, held his broken wrist and screamed curses. His threats were lost in the general chatter and noise of many voices shouting at once.

The serving men had taken to their heels.

The friendly common folk heard the jangle of scabbards and slap-clack of running feet. The city guard came into view before the light of a corner tavern door. The serving men were leading and pointing. The crowd called an urgent warning: "*Custodi*, Donna Magda! *Custodi!*"

Magda laid a hand on Herrack's arm. "Into my gondola!"

"And tomorrow officials will trouble you for having helped a brawler!"

Magda swore zestfully. "Holy troth! The man gives two thoughts to my danger instead of his own! They will slit your nose, my sailor lad. I have never yet seen a nose that looked well slitted." She put perfumed fingers to his nose and pulled it gaily. "Why, fellow, I would love a Turk that had given Agnolo Piombo his bath. He has so much the bad smell. The other villain I know only by name and reputation as henchman tool for the Magnificent Piombo of Venice. Quick! Into the gondola! Or would you have me kneel on these wet stones to beg you?"

Herrack gave his hand to her arm and aided her in stepping into the gondola cabin.

The link boys, two small rascals in black hose with tabards of yellow and gold, beat out the torches and jumped into the bow. The gondolier with a great "*Heu!*" shoved off, skilfully turning the high prow from the landing as the *custodi* came with jostle and clatter, shouted orders and were mocked by the link boys, who screamed and danced like small devils. They made indecent gestures that were visible under the far flicker of the flambeaus on the quay posts.

THE cushions in the gondola were large and soft. Herrack felt he would sink from sight. Magda was close beside him. Chypre, strong as smoke, came from her clothes, and from the necklace of jewels and hollow beads about her neck.

He leaned to look past her toward the landing steps where there was a dazzle of torch—flare on the water and many shapes moving. She put her face before his.

"Are you Lombard? They are often big men with red beard and blue eyes and speak Italian as if they had learned it late in life?"

"Sweet lady, if you have no dislike of Lombards, I am one!"

Music bubbled in her breast and came

out laughter. "And if I hate Lombards?"

"I can be Englishman, Austrian, Swiss or—"

"I have never known an Englishman. Are they good seamen?"

"As well ask if devils are good smiths!"

"Devils, yes! There is one called Huroc the Uskob, who lives among the Uscocchi. He is a true devil. So say Venetians. But they are liars always! As when they fear him and say they do not. Our city has a new governor who is not of the Piombo faction. He tried to harry out the terrible Uscocchi from their islands and could not even find them! Now the Magnificent Piombo"—her voice was scornful—"makes ready an expedition against them. Why do you start? Have I a pin that sticks?" She felt about as if to find a pin that had made Herrack jump. "I hate Venetians!"

"Gondoliers and link boys have ears," Herrack murmured. "Do they not also have tongues?"

"But they love me. Which is more than you seem to do!"

"A mere sailor? And you are Donna Magda!"

"Oh, you threw that dotterel through the air as I might fling a chemise that needed washing! A sailor, hm? My father was a sailor. My mother a fisher maid. But you are no more a mere sailor than I am a mere cherrypicker, though I have often picked cherries, and you have been at sea. The smell of salt and tar and fish and sweat, I like!"

She snuggled close against him as frankly as a kitten that wants cuddling —or, he reflected, as a woman that wants a purse. He was not one to offend a frank lady by seeming to think her unlovely and she nestled in as strong arms as had ever held her.

"But tomorrow, Donna Magda, when you are questioned about having helped this brawler escape?"

"Pah! Count Grimani has no love of Piombos!"

Herrack swore. "But two Venetians, though they stood at swords' points, would turn together like brothers to face any stranger!"

"And how do you know so much? Who are you?"

"I'll gladly tell you as best I can, but first tell your gondolier to go to some unlighted place along the sea wall and let me out—"

"Are you not content?"

"You are going to the *Maddalena.* Captain Ripaudi will no doubt return with you. How very crowded he will find it if I am not out!"

"Then you do know something," she said. "Is he not handsome?"

"Indeed!"

"Brave?"

"I swear it!"

"Successful?"

"I would think myself so if you were coming to my ship to welcome my return."

"Then get yourself a ship and love no other woman! I will come."

"You love him so very much?"

"Love him? La la! I have more than one dog—but love my dogs! They are more faithful than you men! But I do not give up my dogs, my men! So you take warning, sir. You entered my service when you bathed Agnolo Piombo and that bravo. It is quite right for me to love many men, but my men must love no other woman! Come. Be truthful. I hate all lies except my own, which I truthfully confess to my priest, always! Who are you?" She leaned from the cabin and called, "Dodali?"

"Yes, my lady!"

"Go over there to the point. Our friend wishes to step ashore in shadows."

"Yes, my lady," said the gondolier.

Magda settled herself again close to Herrack. "Now who are you?"

"Ripaudi must be impatient, Donna Magda, to have sent word so soon to you."

"I go to surprise him. But who are you?"

"But what will you say tomorrow, when officials question you for aiding the brawlers?"

"Ah, let me think. It is so much harder to think than to talk! I shall tell the plain truth. I shall say Agnolo and his companions drew daggers and—"

"Only his companion, the crook-nosed one, drew a dagger."

"No matter. I have witnesses. They both drew daggers and wounded you, oh, badly! They were drunken. Witnesses will say so with hands on relics. I took you into my gondola to bind your wounds!"

"Then I must make myself a little wound or two to bear you out?"

"Oh, no. My balm heals quickly! But you will not go with me now to the ship?"

"Best not."

"Ah? Can it be that you are a little afraid of my Captain Ripaudi?"

The gondola was drawing near the dark wall. Herrack put his hand deep into a pocket, drew out a soft leather pouch, in the darkness groped for her hand, pressed her fingers about the soft leather.

"If you wish to know who has fear, show this to your Ripaudi! But demand it again. It is my present to you. Then pray for the soul of one Georgius!"

"You are Georgius?"

"Not I. But when your brave, successful captain sees this purse, the soul of Georgius will need prayers!"

"I do not understand."

"Ripaudi will!"

Herrack kissed her forcibly, though without resistance. Indeed, she clung with lingering embrace, whispered softly.

He tossed his cloak on the sea wall, clanked gold pieces into Magda's hand. "For the gondoliers." He stooped, left the cabin, leaped to shore.

Link boys and gondoliers gave him god-speed. He stood in darkness on the wall. Below him a small white hand flicked in the dimness as Donna Magda waved.

He watched the black gondola glide away under the rhythmic sweep of oars until it vanished into the darkness with high prow pointed toward the *Maddalena.*

Herrack undid the cloak, fastened the cutlass concealingly high on his waist, almost up under his arm pit, drew the cloak about him and made his way toward the lighted quay.

CHAPTER XVI

MASKED ERRAND

Herrack went by a side passage into the tavern *La Morte de' Turchi,* a name of enticement to seafarers. The entrance swarmed with people wanting seats. Every sailor off the *Maddalena* had a cluster about him. Many were already seated, called loudly for food and drink, jangled money, talked clamorously to bravos and gay girls who patted backs, laughed, and—as chance offered—filched.

Roasts sizzled on spits that two little soot-blackened boys turned, eyes wide and mouths agape at the clamor of seamen back from far voyaging, pockets filled with coins. In the rear yard chickens squawked as maids and scullions yanked them from roosts.

In the open kitchen women, brought in from the neighborhood to help, made great salads. Salty seafarers were ravenous for lettuce, cucumbers, leeks. Servants ran breathlessly with mugs and flagons. Musicians played.

Herrack seated himself on a stool in shadows behind a square stone column near the kitchen. He had no mind to join in the revelry.

A buxom woman in a hurry stumbled against him. He steadied her.

"Oh, sir!" she said in a fluster.

"Bring muscat of Cyprus. Here." He

pressed a coin into her palm. "And tell the drawer I am sober and have been in Cyprus. If he wants to wear his ears after I taste the stuff, let it be muscat from Cyprus."

"Oh, sir, it is very costly!"

"You hold a ducat!"

She blinked at her palm in the dimness. "Are you off the *Maddalena?*"

"Have I the swine-look?"

"God have praise, no, sir!"

She hurried away in a lumbering walk and brought back wine in a stone mug, glassware being too precious to risk in tonight's service.

The drawer had belief in the woman's words and a liking for his ears. The muscat of Cyprus was too sweet for drinking, excellent to sip and smell.

Herrack sat thoughtfully, the mug on his knee, a shoulder against a side of the column. An hour passed so. He stopped a cook with coins and had her bring a slice of dripping roast on a trencher of bread.

"Well scorched meat," said Herrack. Another servant, also checked in her hurrying, was overpaid to bring a bunch of dried Corinthian grapes.

Herrack dined well, sat at his ease, spat grape seed about on the flagged floor and looked on.

The *custodi* in long dark cloaks came often and lingered at the entrance. They knew thieves and false dicers, saw they were busy, left them at their games, and would later perhaps make claims.

The noise increased with drunkenness, but many noisy men were soon silenced by gustfully pouring down mug after mug of wine laced with maraschino. It tickled them to see the pretended astonishment of girls: "Oh, you drink like a sailor!" "Oh, now surely you will not dare drink another so!" Drunken men soon lay asprawl under tables with pockets emptied. Long at sea, home with loot, yet again penniless before food was in their bellies.

Pretty thieves snarled, scratched, pulled hair in dividing spoils, and their bravos quarreled and hectored, but drew no blood, since each was too wise to turn his back on another.

The hunchbacked Carlos was there, an horrific brute, but wenches wet his mouth with kisses and their fingers, like lime twigs, took away money. Carlos drank much, ate prodigiously, paused to smack this girl or that. A man with weighted purse might pick and choose among the fairest fluttery shore-merchandise.

Black-eyed musicians strummed a rapid dance on guitars, and a tipsy girl with colored skirts in a flurry bounded perilously on a table. A deep circle of men cheered with hands half lifted to catch her when she fell. She did not fall.

At the other side of the room the clip-headed old gunner had an arm about a slip of a girl decked in bright ribbands. He roared a bawdy song in French as he swayed his mug. From time to time he paused, put the mug to the girl's mouth, dribbled wine down on her laced bodice by up-turning the mug too steeply. When she strangled and coughed he smacked her back, then drank himself. He hurled the empty mug across the room, shattering it against the stone wall. It was his signal for another to be brought.

THERE was a stir at the entrance. *Custodi* appeared, alertly pushed loiterers this way and that, making room.

Then came a small party of elegant gentlemen with ladies, all in masks, looking much like lordly spectators at a low play they wished to enjoy without being recognized. The ladies appeared very tall. Their eyes turned here, there, everywhere, with bright dazzle-glow of loveliness through the mask holes. It was all strange, amusing, exciting. The maskers laughed. Their cloaks were long, of velvet; when any movement parted the cloaks there was gleam and sheen of puffed silks, jewels, gold.

One of the masked men half turned his head to lift his mask and scratch his nose. It was a soft, sensually handsome face, with a chestnut beard closely trimmed on the cheeks and sharpened to a point. The nose was sharp, not big. His eyes seemed to have a fixed stare, as if alive in a dead face.

Herrack's look fastened on the man's face as he rose up off the stool. "Blood of Christ!" Herrack stepped back, still watching that face after the mask was replaced. Herrack kept his eyes across his own shoulder as he started to run for the side passage, hurrying out to get around in front.

In his haste he bumped against a small cloaked man, who brought up against the wall with a jar that knocked out shrill, venomous oaths.

"You'll burn your pretty tongue with a grown man's hot words!" Herrack called, mocking and ran on.

"Ho, wait! God's name! It's you I search for! Wait!"

There was no waiting. The passageway was dark but Jehan had recognized the voice. He scuttled forward with one hand holding the cloak up to his knees, the out-reaching as if to snatch the bulky shadow that lunged on.

Jehan overtook him where the crowd pressed close about the entrance and link boys, a-strut with lackey insolence, waited with wavering flambeaux. He seized Herrack's cloak, tugged, talked.

Herrack at first gave no ear. He looked straight into the eyes of a soldier of the *custodi* who, in pushing the crowd back, came up close to this tall broad sailor and stared as if recognizing him.

Herrack put his fingers to his short thick red beard and said boldly:

"Yes, I am he!"

The soldier half smiled, glanced aside, looked again at Herrack. His tone was a little furtive. "And had you broken his neck instead of wrist, 'twere better!" The soldier edged close, put a hand to the side of his mouth. "Watch out for a filed knife blade between your shoulders—in the back!"

"Thanks, my friend!"

Dagger blades were filed to hold poison that was poured on the roughened spots. If the wound did not kill, venom would.

Jehan still talked, excitedly: ". . . .I have been in and out of every tavern! When I heard your voice I thought 'twas answer to honest prayer!"

"Your prayers for throat-ease will be honest enough," said Herrack with good-humored menace, "when I choke out of you my share of what was in that Galen!"

Jehan's wry-lipped whisper said, "God mistake me for a Turk if I haven't wished you had the whole of it on that burly bulk of yours! I, prowling about in taverns and dark alleyways with a queen's wealth at my girdle! Whew! I have no courage when I have much to lose! 'Tis very wrong that thieves should be in the world!"

"Ah," jeered Herrack, "then you sought me out to give over my share?"

Jehan's oaths rippled through a laughing mouth. "Pah! Who keeps faith with fools is but fool himself, and you were one not to be first to the Galen! I hoped to hide all and swear I had none. But I was jerked off the *Maddalena* like a goose from a crate and sent to find you! I could not crowd by yon lords and ladies and so went the kitchen way. Blood and wounds! You run to gape at silk masks like a child at a bear! Magda will have my head if I do not fetch you!"

"Why so?"

"God, what have you done to turn the gentle Magda into hell's biggest fury?"

"Done? Naught more than give her a kiss and a purse, which seldom maddens any woman!"

Jehan pulled with confidential tugging until Herrack turned a little. Herrack, of a height to see above the crowd, cast glances now at the entrance, now at

the clerk's face, and listened to hurried whispers:

"She came on board happy as a queen at her own wedding, and into the cabin, where Piombo puffed out his belly and bobbed his gray head in courtier's nodding at your accursed Moor, who was bedecked in splendor to make Sheba envious. Ripaudi, all aglow, and Cado Mosto too, were telling how she was the daughter of Sidi Hamet, *Renegado* of Tripoli, worth her weight in rubies. Behind her stood Black Pietro, proud as a devil held captive by a princess that he loved. The very whiskers of old Piombo wiggled in joy—"

"Come to the point, chatterbox!"

"The point? 'Twas Magda's sharp tongue! One look and her face grew black as any murderer's at the moment he drives the knife! '*Who is this woman?*' Oh, but she knows every word that fishwives have, and used many! My tender ears were burned, for after all I have had much training in the church and—"

"To church you'll go for burial service if you splatter more words! To the point!"

"The point? It was a leather purse Magda of a sudden dangled before Ripaudi's nose! She cried, 'What of this? Oh, that I had let the gibbet have you!' She shook it in his face."

"I like your Magda!" Herrack muttered.

"In truth, had she stabbed Ripaudi he would have looked much as he did when he heard her say an English seaman, a great-shouldered man, handsome and red-bearded, gave it to her, bidding her pray for the soul of one Georgius! She cried, 'And what means this?' "

Herrack laughed and bent an ear nearer Jehan's mouth. "Go on."

"Ripaudi's black face grew pale as lye-washed vellum! You see, our Magda has a mighty jealousy of him, because some years gone he was a mere bravo, in prison, promised to the gibbet. She, being the fool that every woman is when she loves, tickled old men's noses, coaxed, and got him free. More than free, employment. He fights well and rose from one ship to another until the Piombos—all right, I'll to the point!"

Jehan moved back before the menace of Herrack's fingers that slowly approached his slim throat, and Herrack said, "Hurry your tale!"

"Oh, a fine time we had of it there in the cabin with yells and screams, with threats to curdle blood! Ripaudi shrieked and cursed, but not so loud as Magda. Would you believe, your Moor sat tense and said not one word! I would have sworn no woman in a gabble-brawl could keep her own tongue still!"

"What then?"

"Why, of a sudden Magda dragged me along the deck, into the gondola and so home. She asked ten thousand questions. Now she sits in her house with her knuckles between her white teeth and her eyes on the floor. 'Find him!' she said. 'Bring him to me!'

"I pled, 'Why Donna Magda, here's my head and you may have it on a platter! But bring him? He', I said, 'is too big a burden for even the Devil, else had been packed off to hell long ago!' That's what I said. But she, with teeth on edge and fire-glint in her eyes, said, 'Find him! And say to him that Magda bids him come and offers whatever he may ask, friendship, wealth, influence—any and all! He will come!' So she said. Will you?"

The elegant maskers were leaving the tavern. Their chatter was merry. The *custodi* made clearance for them and the link boys went before, waving torches.

They moved toward the waterside. People, especially women, pressed close, the better to peer at fine ladies' wear. They whispered with smack of lips, jogged ribs and pointed. The ladies, after the fashion of Venice, clicked awkwardly on high chopines, the stilt-like

slippers of gilded wood that were worn to protect the ribband-decked shoes of fine leather from street filth. Their drunken-like teetering was supported by the gentlemen.

Herrack glowered steadily at the silhouettes moving behind torch lights to the great gondola. When the party had gone down the wide long steps to the landing, Herrack turned to Jehan, spoke harshly:

"Take me to Magda!"

JEHAN knocked loud and fast with the ring that hung from a lion's mouth. A lantern burned overhead.

A shuttered peephole in the thick wood moved. Two eyes peered through.

Jehan spoke, pushed up his cap. He was recognized at a glance but the old peering eyes turned this way and that until the entrance was carefully searched for lurkers. The bravos of Zara were bold men.

A whine-toned voice spoke through the hole as the eyes peered upon Herrack: "It is he?"

"He, mother," said Jehan.

The door swung open, slowly and not wide. They stooped to pass under the heavy iron chains that kept it from being swung wide by sudden push.

The wrinkled, bowed woman pressed hastily against the door as if to close it against expected danger. Herrack's push jarred it to. He raised the lever, clanked the three great bars with one motion into sockets. A castle gate would be as hard to force.

The old woman replaced her stool on which she could rise to the shutter hole, then gazed at Herrack, noted his face, more carefully noted his clothes. She pressed her lips tightly over toothless gums and waggled her head in doubt. Hers was a weakness for fine gentlemen with rings on their fingers, rings easily slipped off and left behind.

"These be troublous times." She had a kind of whimpering whine. "Twice within the hour men have come to make inquiry. The last was a captain of the *custodi*. I told him Donna Magda was at the great ball Ser Filippo Grimani gives tonight for the Spaniard."

The old woman simpered slyly and led the way up great stone stairs. From the upper hall she took them into a room where the stone walls were hung with crimson cloth.

This room, like the rooms in fine homes of Venice, was large. The furniture was of massive wood intricately carved. A bed so high from the floor that plush-covered steps rose to it filled an alcove, and overhead was a weighty canopy of velour and gold-covered fringe. Before many mirrors that were joined together in a frame against the wall stood a long table covered with glass, pots and jars and vases, some fantastic in shape and filled with unguents, creams, perfumes, pastes.

Magda leaned forward from a high-backed chair, her elbows on the chair's arms. Her legs were crossed at the knees and the dangling foot, in a slipper of gilded leather, tapped the air vibrantly. She was disheveled. To breathe more easily she had torn away the lacy throat of her gown and broken the perfumed necklace. It dangled listlessly between her fingers. She looked a little drunken.

Under frowning brows she stared at Herrack a long time. Only her eyes moved up and down, up and down over his length of body, across his breadth of shoulder, hovered on his bearded face.

In the light of many candles, brightened by the shimmer of crystal, Herrack also gazed at her. The disheveled aspect of drunkenness gave her a bacchic charm, very much as if she were a vine maiden who had got into finery that did not please. Her face was broad, high-cheeked, her mouth large, the lips bursting with ripeness. The irregularity of her features blended into a deeper, stranger beauty than prettiness. Her

lure was not mere surface coloring and shape; it was blood-deep, a part of flesh and bone.

She drew from a fold of the dress the purse that Herrack had put into her palm, laid the back of her hand on her crossed knee, looked up:

"I did as you said. And he trembled! The Virgin of Heaven knows I knew he was a man, therefore ingrate, faithless, cruel! All that I have forgiven. But I did not think him *coward!*"

She flung the purse to the floor. It struck softly, having been emptied. Her finger followed it. "What secret is in this, that Guido Ripaudi trembled, caught his breath, grew pale? Tell me!"

Herrack shrugged. "Nothing more than that a man in the dark of the deck tried to stab me. He failed—and talked!"

"With your fingers on his throat, hm?"

"A shake and a slap. The ship was near anchorage. I sent him to Ripaudi to tell him that I was dead and overboard. That purse, and what was in it, was his reward. I saw it given. When he came off the poop, I took the purse. I was curious to see at what price Ripaudi valued my death. The stab-back's name was Georgius. How long do you think he will live after coming within reach of Ripaudi's sword? Therefore his soul needs prayers!"

"So?" Magda put her knuckles up under her chin, leaned heavily and looked at Herrack, asked slowly: "He hates you because he fears you?"

"He hates me. No doubt of that."

Magda's words came between clenched teeth. "But is he not jealous that you love that Moorish slut? A black-faced infidel?"

Herrack's laugh burst deep in his throat. "Donna Magda, if this meddlesome rogue has told you that, he deserves to be set dangling by the neck from a bed cord!"

"I said nothing of the kind!" Jehan shouted.

"No! But you did not deny it when I said it!" Magda flung the broken necklace at him, not playfully. It was the first thing at hand.

The impudent rogue picked it up, examined it, pocketed it.

"Out! You and Quella, both! Get out!"

They went. Old Quella closed the door with a bang.

"Bolt it!" Magda said. "I know that trick. You will find the door ajar."

Herrack crossed to the door. Quella had banged it to and at the same instant deftly unlatched the door and opened it to a wide crack.

"In her younger days Quella sold the secrets of the noblest families in Venice. Even now, somehow, she knows most of those in Zara. She and the Devil must sleep in the same bed! Bring that bench near me and sit. There is much to say, and I am in the mood to listen!"

HER eyes followed with dark brooding as he went for the bench, brought it, threw off the cloak, disclosing the heavy cutlass which he drew for greater ease in sitting. He started to lay it on the floor.

Magda put out her hand. "Let me see. I have heard how you fight."

He gave it to her. She put both hands to the hilt. "How heavy! The men I know use rapiers."

"We who have no finesse use weight—just lift the sword and let it fall. Whom it strikes, dies."

"Jehan says you use it like a rapier."

"Much that rascal says is untrue!"

She gave back the cutlass, took hold of his hand as he took the blade, coaxed earnestly: "Who, just *who* are you?"

"An English seaman, Donna Magda."

Her lips flashed: "But somewhat more! Don't lie to me! I can be trusted!"

"I am not lying."

Her red-lipped mouth flattened in a

twisted curve, but her words were pleasantly derisive. "The great *Renegado* of Tripoli would give his ugly daughter —but still a daughter!—and much treasure into the keeping of a mere English seaman!" Again she coaxed with the promises of jeweled eyes, "So who are you?"

"An English seaman, Magda."

"Mother of God! Will you not trust me?"

"With what?"

"Your name and what it means to Sidi Hamet! Who are you? Why did the *Renegado* think you worthy?"

"Most likely because I am of a size that fights well. And partly because I did not want the mission. That had an aspect of honesty. Then, too, he may have guessed that I try to keep promises made to others so I may never distrust those I make to myself!"

She stared for a time, then quietly:

"Do you still plan to take that ugly Moor wench into England?"

"Saints alone can work miracles."

"But you do mean to send a warning to that *Renegado*."

Herrack swore. "So that chatterer Jehan has emptied his wallet into your ears!"

"And if I help you?"

"Can you?"

Magda said, "I can give you the name of a Jew merchant who can reach anywhere in the world. And you may trust him. He hates the Piombos!"

"Why do you hate them?" A cold hard look watched her. Herrack half suspected she was nimbly tricking him.

Her answer came in a flood of fury. She used unclean words, told of studied insults put on her. Long ago the Piombos had favored rival *cortigianas* in a quarrel over some trifle; and Magda, humiliated, was unforgiving. It began at a country-side merrymaking where a Piombo did not put the crown of laurel and posies on Magda's head, grew to embitterment, became studied hatred.

Herrack weighed her anger with poised wariness. He recalled that merely giving an apple to one woman rather than to another had once brought on a ten years' war of which Homer wrote.

In talking, Magda became calm. Her moods changed quickly. There was the tinkle of a taunt as she asked, "So now, my mere English seaman, what will you give me if I give you the name of my Jew?"

"What do you want?"

Magda studied with sobering face. For all the apparent feeling in her voice she might have been asking if he would hand her a glove as she said, "Will you kill Guido Ripaudi for me?"

"Not for you, no! But I will kill him. If his death pleases you, good! Anyhow, I think your hate of him is all too sudden to have much root."

Magda kept on looking into the mirror. "Why so?"

"Tonight you went joyously on board his ship to greet him. Because he had a fair young girl whose ransom value is enormous, you got rageful. Would your jealousy be appeased if he cut her throat and let a ducat dribble out with every drop of blood?"

"You fool!" She faced about, leaned far from the chair. "He means to hold and keep her! 'Twas in his eyes! He loves her! He will keep her for himself! He called me meddlesome slut! I, who took him out of prison, gave him clothes and food, lifted him up until now he is a great sea captain! And why this scorn of me? Because of a Moor."

Herrack rocked back on the bench, pursed his lips, pulled at the end of his mustache. "Which merely means you have loved him—and still do!"

Magda leaped from the chair. Her shaken hair looked wind-whipped, and she leaned toward Herrack with hand claw-like and put her face near his face with her dark eyes ablaze and the full red lips drawn tautly back above

clenched teeth. There was wine on her breath.

"I hate him! Her and *you!*"

Herrack, not moving, laughed.

"You laugh! How dare you laugh!"

Herrack's answer was to put his arms about her, not gently. She struck, scratched, kicked, writhed, jerked, all the while swearing furiously. She, a strong girl, was helpless. He stood up, lifting her. Her feet churned the skirts in frantic flurry. The slippers flew off. One fell among the fragile bottles on the table. Broken glass tinkled. She called him names, and he laughed.

"Why do you laugh?"

He kissed her roughly, with force; shook her playfully as one shakes a child. She lay still, smiled. "I like to be held so." Her hand fingered his beard, pulled:

"And to think I like a bearded man! Quella is right! Men, all men, ought to be plucked till they shave their beards for a mattress-maker's crust of bread! Every morning God hears me complain of beards! I pray of mornings, being so often too drunk at night. Oh, I complain much of gray beards that have been put in curlers and waggle over toothless mouths. When a toothless man says, 'I love you!' it is better than a comedy. Once I had Quella shave an old drunken graybeard as he slept, and I laughed—oh, I laughed until—*Mother of God, what is that!*"

From far within the house came scream on scream, wild and shrill as the wail of a damned soul falling hellward.

CHAPTER XVII

DEATH IN THE DARK

HERRACK let Magda slip to the floor and stooped for the cutlass.

"It is in the house! Quella! Quella is being murdered!"

"The crone can't yell like that!"

He ran to the door, jerked back the lock.

Magda said, "Robbers! Robbers! They do as they like in Zara and are never caught!"

"This time they'll run fast if they're not!"

Jehan hurtled into sight from the top of the stairs. He ran as if for his life. He struck headlong against Herrack, who threw up the cutlass to keep its edge from the heedless youth.

"Bravos!" Jehan panted. "The door —tricked Quella and she is dead!"

Herrack shoved him aside.

"A dozen, I swear!" cried Jehan wildly.

"That means at least two and maybe a third!"

There was clattering stamp of hurried feet on the stairs, click of steel, oaths, and five masked men surged up into the hall. They had drawn swords in hand.

Only one, a tall man, did carry a sword. He had a dagger in his left hand. His right arm was under a cloak. He pointed with the dagger:

"There! That is he! Kill him! Kill him!"

The bravos bounced forward in attitudes of menace, but Herrack waited for them with such readiness that they took on a furtive crouched caution, glared, spat oaths as a cornered cat spits, did not rush.

Magda caught at Herrack's arm. "Come into the room!"

He shook her off with a push like a blow, kept his face to the front. "Within doors, you two!"

The masked men crouched on tiptoes with much side-glancing of one toward another. The cloaked figure from behind urged them on with frenzied curses. It seemed to Herrack he ought to know that voice.

The cloaked masker flung his arm as if to drive them, yelled, "Oh! On at him! Kill him! I'll give twice more than promised! You are four to one!"

So suddenly did Herrack leap upon them that there were confused cries and backward staggering. The heavy cutlass had the weight of a battle-ax. It flew like a rapier in an arm and wrist made powerful by long hours at an heavy oar. His only defense was a whirlwind of steel. One blow and an arm was useless, another and a head was chopped. The cutlass struck a rapier and snapped it.

Only the smallest of the pack had fierceness and courage. He lunged forward with even a broken sword. The tip of Herrack's high-swung cutlass struck on a candle bracket up on the side of the wall. The blow was checked, yet the blade bit deep; and as he struck, Herrack caught the small man by the throat and hurled him against the wall. The man dropped as if the back of his head were shattered.

The tall figure with the dagger in his hand turned, ran, was followed by a fattish bravo who had not struck a blow. The tall cloaked figure reached the stairs first, half jumped, half fell, went headlong in a scrambling sprawl and screamed.

The fattish man was running so fast that in trying to turn at the top of the stairs he struck the wall; for an instant he paused there as if flattened.

Herrack caught him by the neck, jerked, flung him down, swiped his head with the cutlass. Without a pause for balance Herrack jumped down the flight of a dozen steps, clear to the carpeted landing.

He struck with a force that tore the heavy rug loose from its fastenings under his feet and he fell. The cutlass rattled as he dropped it in flinging up a hand to keep from crashing his head against the wall. Herrack rolled over, crouched, jumped again, landed on the floor of the lower hall. He staggered across it and ran at the cloaked figure.

The man turned with dagger lifted. In turning his cloak swirled, opened wide in front, showed an arm in a sling.

"So, Ser Crook-nose! We meet again!"

(to be continued)

This advertisement is not intended to offer alcoholic beverages for sale or delivery in any state or community where the advertising, sale or use thereof is unlawful.

CROSSPATCH, COBRA KILLER

by ANTHONY M. RUD

NEAR Midnapur on the Kedgeree, which is a jungle in India near the mouth of Mother Ganges, two infants fought to the death. A white man watched. The white hunter had just shot a two-ton rhinoceros; but he forgot all about that triumph, leaving the carcass to be dragged out by his native gun-bearers.

He held his breath, occasionally gasping in sympathy, while a tiny, awkward fledgeling of a bird fought a twenty-six-inch king cobra. Fought it a full hour, killed it, and then proceeded to make a full meal of it!

Call that victorious infant Crosspatch, because of his disposition. There was a story back of his presence in India—he whose feathered ancestors ate snakes in the mangrove swamps around the delta of the Niger River, on the Ivory Coast of Africa. There was human tragedy, an odd slant of poetic justice—and then the fact that the Viceroy of India for years had a standing offer to purchase each secretary-bird like Crosspatch that was brought to India.

Because of bad temper, no secretary-bird ever has been a real pet. And man has tried harder with this raucous-voiced, feathered termagant than he ever tried with the ichneumons or the storks—the other snake-killers native to India.

Many years before, a man named Norcross, shocked by the death of a comrade by snake-bite, came back to India from further tropical venturing in Africa, bringing with him a crate of secretary-birds. He released them. They promptly flew off into the jungle swamps, and disappeared. Crosspatch may have been of the tenth or twelfth generation.

As a fledgeling, up to the time of his

first fight with a cobra, Crosspatch showed no signs of greatness. In fact he was the last and least accomplished of his brood. He was one raucously squawking appetite, and all the hungrier because he was larger than his six brothers and sisters.

At two months of age his body was about the size of a Leghorn rooster; but his legs were awkward stilts, twice as long as those of a chicken. He had so few feathers then that he looked as though he had been plucked, all ready for singeing and the oven.

Crosspatch had been deserted. The others of his brood had flopped up and out of the nest, tumbled to the ground with their insufficient wings flapping wildly, and there had started in careers of their own. The bad-tempered parents had considered their job done. This last fledgeling could stay there in the nest and starve, or get out and rustle him his own snakes!

For a day or so Crosspatch stayed hungry; and did he tell the steaming jungle all about it! Even at that age, a secretary-bird has a voice which makes a war veteran grab for the gas mask he used to don at sound of siren or Sparton horn.

When he is full grown, stocky, and stands thirty inches at the comb, he can make a good stab at out-shrieking a Baldwin locomotive.

Desperate with the gnawings of hunger, Crosspatch broadcast one final raucous appeal; but no mother bird came. Still grumbling anger at not being served his usual viper cutlets and filet of baby boa constrictor, he climbed up to the rim of the twig nest and teetered there, clutching with those immensely strong talons which would develop to become even more destructive than the talons of the American bald eagle. His fleshy but almost featherless wings fanned the air for balance.

Then he took the eighteen-foot plunge —and it was a flop. He tried his best to fly, but the vestigial wings sufficed only to carry him to earth some five yards away from the spot he would have hit if he dropped like a plummet.

He struck hard, though off balance, and rolled twice before he could regain his feet, squawking indignation and rage. Then abruptly strength appeared to desert him, and he fell forward on his breastbone in the queer resting position of secretary-birds—both legs behind, wings outstretched and resting on the ground like those of a brooding hen.

After a time he cocked an eye at a huge yellow millipede segmenting past. He did not grab or peck at it, though it did look just a little like a snake. Nothing less than a real serpent would do. When he felt like any other form of food he might yawn, scratch the back of his head, and peck listlessly at a green shoot or two. But right now all else was spinach to him, who hungered for snake.

Then he glimpsed a thin line of smooth brown—a snake that was blue-white underneath when it raised itself a few inches from the ground. It was deadly, of course, though only a baby cobra not much older than Crosspatch himself.

Forgotten then was lassitude! With a raucous challenge, Crosspatch scrambled erect and dashed at his traditional enemy. Oddly enough when the white man came upon this combat a few minutes later, the secretary-bird exhibited few signs of awkwardness. On his stocky legs, driven by the lusts of appetite, he was an aggressive, wary and competent fighter.

He won the fight finally by squeezing off the head of the cobra between his talons. Then he gorged—and the white man approached slowly, picking up the head and hood of the dead snake, and whistling softly to himself. He was thinking of the compound back there on the Kedgeree, and of the deadly panic which came all too often at night. Crosspatch paid him no attention at all.

The white man laid down his express

rifle. He made a lunge and a sort of smothering flying tackle, ending with the secretary-bird a captive in his arms.

Crosspatch squawked and struggled. He could kick like a miniature ostrich. He could chop through a finger with his strong, curved beak, just as easily as if it had been an earthworm. By the time he was hooded and subdued, the white man showed honorable wounds. He took more pride in this quarry than he took in his big rhino.

SO Crosspatch was taken to the compound, and the bungalow on the Kedgeree, from which his new master and two other white men, bachelors all, managed a tremendous oil-seed plantation.

The secretary-bird wore one leg-iron, and was given the freedom of a twenty-foot nickelled chain—about as heavy as an old-fashioned watch chain. Crosspatch did not approve of this at all. He squawked, and nearly yanked off his foot, trying to escape. Then he lay down and sulked.

Food was a problem. Like an ant-bear in a zoo for whom millions of the usual termites cannot be provided, and who must have synthetic food riced and colored to resemble ants, Crosspatch spurned curried rice, fish, ordinary meats and game. He wanted snake; and when it was not immediately forthcoming he squawked raucously, flopped about at the end of his chain, and began to look as seedy as a rooster with the pip.

Lawes, the white master, ran over a small constrictor black-snake which had slithered out of the oil bush to the white auto road which led through the heart of the plantation. Thinking of Crosspatch, Lawes took the dead snake home with him.

The secretary-bird was lying in his peculiar position of flop, on his breast-bone, with beak and wings relaxed to the ground and legs thrust backward. Coaxingly Lawes spoke, extending the snake dainty. Fortunately, the tail of the blacksnake still wriggled.

HAURRRAKKK!

That was the challenge, the battle-cry. And then the whirlwind! Disregarding chain and shackle, Crosspatch went for that serpent. He fought it up and down the yard, caring not at all that it did not fight back. Then when it was satisfactorily decapitated and subdued, according to his lights, he ate most of it in one meal. After that he was lethargic and peaceful. He even let Lawes pick him up and dust him with lice powder.

Not that he was tamed; far from it! Lawes never received one atom of affection from the secretary-bird. But in time, giving a handful of *annas* each day to the first plantation worker who would bring a snake, the master won a certain toleration from Crosspatch. He became the only human being not subject to instant attack.

As time went on, some of the snakes brought were in baskets—alive and venomous. Their killing savored of cruelty, perhaps, but it was no different from what Crosspatch would have done had he been free. Lawes saw several of these combats, and they never failed to leave him sober-eyed and shaken—and the secretary-bird stuffed and languid, unable to do more than squawk sulkily when the chain and shackle were replaced.

Crosspatch was about ten months old when Lawes trimmed his wings. The master had a job for the bird. He put Crosspatch in a crate, and set forth with him in his car. There had been a tragedy at Murshidabad. In the home of the collector-magistrate a babu servant had died of cobra bite, inflicted by a serpent which had gained access to the house in mysterious fashion, and just as mysteriously disappeared after the attack.

Lawes had been thinking of the twenty thousand people who die each year in India from snakebite; and he

had decided to bring the talents of Crosspatch to official attention.

Lawes let Crosspatch get hungry while he explained his plan. The collector-magistrate was more than willing; he had been forced to move from the house until the mystery of that cobra was explained and the snake killed. So at dusk of the second day dim lights were left in the rooms, and Crosspatch loosed inside to roam about at will. A servant was posted outside to listen for sounds of a possible disturbance. Cobras reverse the ordinary snake custom, and hunt at night. It was hoped that the killer would come, and that Crosspatch would meet him.

The bird's temper was vicious. It explored all the rooms, occasionally taking a destructive peck at some table or other furnishing it pleased him to mar. Then he quieted down to sulk.

The death-dealer did come. Up in the latticed ceiling came a faint sound. A *punka* started to sway with no hand on the rope. Slowly it moved back and forth while down from it something stiff but sinuous, and horribly long, slid until it touched the surface of the dining room table just below.

A nine-foot king cobra was descending from its nest in the ceiling!

Like a rivulet of ink finding its way, the serpent came, unhurried. It slid down a chair, reached the rug, left its scratchy nap hastily for the bare floor, and then started back toward the kitchens.

That was when the native servant posted outside to listen, awoke with a start. A tornado had broken loose inside the home of the collector-magistrate!

Sound or smell had brought Crosspatch stalking alert, head on one side. Then the instant he saw the monster serpent he attacked! His challenge echoed. A chair was hurled over as the cobra drew back swiftly to strike at this daring enemy. Its hood, flaccid until that second, began to puff out to the general size and shape of a stingaree.

One swipe with his talons, and Crosspatch leapt away. The cobra missed by two inches, then lifted its head, hood and front third swayingly from the floor, facing this dodging, menacing feathered creature which never ceased to utter those awful sounds of derision and hatred.

Then with a louder yell, the bird leapt in a second time, grabbing for the slimmest part of the swaying neck, fluttering the trimmed wings, dancing in and out, confusing the snake, dizzying him.

Always those deafening, raucous shrieks! Within two minutes the entire compound knew the killer was at bay there in the home of the collector-magistrate. A buffet full of glassware crashed. A picture came down from the wall. Men held their breath and trembled, knowing that the deadliest snake in India was being fought to the death by the secretary-bird.

The almost-grown secretary-bird had tackled a worthy foe indeed. Ability to dodge was the paramount defensive weapon for Crosspatch. As is the case with every warm-blooded creature save the pig and rhinoceros, one drop of cobra venom under the skin meant death. (Because of the deep layers of fat which neutralizes the poison, pig and rhino are practically immune.)

The cobra, however, had to clamp his jaws upon his quarry in order to inject the poison; merely striking with his fangs was not sufficient, as it would have been with a mamba, a rattler or a bushmaster. That was his chief handicap. Several times his fangs grazed Crosspatch, but never did they fasten and cling.

The giant cobra was only seven inches in girth, but as strong as a steel cable and swift as chain lightning, once he got down to the serious business of killing this squawking, menacing, feathered creature who snatched at him with

sharp talons, ripping his skin, and whose beak on one occasion nearly tore him into two pieces at the middle. From that wound sticky, viscous snake blood made slippery the bare floor beyond the rugs.

Then it happened. The cobra struck once, twice, thrice—and missed. With a raucous scream of triumph the raptorial killer snatched—and caught a firm grip of sharp, inexorable talons about the slim neck of the cobra just behind the inflated hood!

That was the battle. Instantly the ripping, crunching beak slashed down. Standing on one leg, Crosspatch paid no attention to the writhing coils of tail which slashed and whipped at him. He bit straight through the cobra's neck, killing it. Then he flung aside the head and hood, which he never tried to eat.

But this was death as well as victory. From the ceiling above, unseen and unsuspected in the heat of combat, had come the female snake, the cobra's mate. She struck, and her fangs went deep into the leg of the gallant secretary-bird. The jaws clamped . . .

With a terrible yell Crosspatch bent to bite away that death menace, too late.

The sun was well up in the morning before cautious white men, armed with sticks and shotguns, entered the house. They found two headless cobras and a dead secretary-bird. In the leg of the snatcher still were sunk the fangs of the second snake. The head, hood, and two inches of neck still hung there. The rest of the cobra had whipped away to die with the fragments of its mate.

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THE CAMP-FIRE

where readers, writers, and adventurers meet

WILLIAM E. BARRETT joins our Writers' Brigade in this issue. I hope you men give him a good reception. I've just bought another story of his—a short story that seems to me a very vigorous yarn—and you'll be reading that one soon also.

Here he tells us something about himself:

This isn't my first visit to the Camp-Fire, though I'm coming this time as a writer. The other night I did some thumbing through my rather astonishing library and found miscellaneous copies of *Adventure* dating as far back as 1913. That is one whale of a long time. While those *Adventures* were accumulating in trunks and boxes and following me around a lot of territory, I became in swift succession a student, newspaper man, half-baked engineer, benedict, parent, publicity shooter, advertising executive and spinner of tall tales.

Now, with a full five hundred published yarns under my belt, I am making a bow to the Camp-Fire with a speaking part and the best that I can offer is bound to be mighty pale beside the glamorous life stories of those who have preceded me into the contents pages. I am merely one of those lads who happen around where a lot of other people are producing excitement.

I didn't bring any oil to the surface of Oklahoma, but I was in Seminole when she boomed. I didn't raise any hell in Borger—not a serious amount anyway—but I checked out of there only a week before things got so tough that they had to have martial law. I've been in oil towns from Wyoming to old Mexico with a lot of side trips to places that are in the United States but not on the maps. In Bowlegs, Oklahoma, I saw Fogarty of "Driller's Dice."

He started in a dice game with a dollar that night and he made thirteen straight passes without pulling down a dime. When he threw box-cars for the fourteenth pass—with money enough on the board to start a bank—it hurt something away down inside of me; and I'd never seen him before.

I never saw him again, either. Like the rest of the crowd, I was interested in him while he was on the boom. When he hit salt water, he wasn't exciting any more and I drifted away with the rest. I've often thought of him, though, and wondered if he ate that night.

The yarn is my salute to him. It might have happened. Stranger things did—and do. That's all there is. I hope that the Camp-Fire crowd likes Fogarty and his Hortense. I want to bring him back.

THE parachute equipment used in the painting on the cover of this issue was supplied to Hubert Rogers by Joe Crane, famous parachute jumper, and I feel that a few facts about him would be of interest to Camp-Fire, for here is a true adventurer on a very modern frontier.

Tall, blue-eyed, and rangy-looking, Joe Crane was a kid from Carlinville, Illinois, when he started his flying career in the barnstorming days immedi-

ately following the war. His first jump was in 1923 and since then has bailed out some six hundred and sixty times!

In 1924 he accidentally made the first "delayed opening" jump during a scheduled exhibition. This was no dare-devil stunt but a deliberate delay in pulling the rip-cord until he had fallen out of the altitude of high winds which would have carried an open chute far beyond his objective—the landing field below. Needless to say the chute opened in time for a perfect landing but not before a great gasp went up from the crowd of craning spectators! Since then he has made many delayed jumps, once falling forty-two hundred feet before opening his chute, a world's record until recently, when it was broken by a Russian.

A great many of his jumps have been pure stunts and a description of them would fill a good-sized volume. One of these consisted of bailing out at a great altitude with seven parachutes fastened together in a string. These he intended to open jumping clear of one at a time until he was "down to his last chute"! He misjudged his altitude however and landed with two unused spares.

He has bailed out with a companion and accompanied him part way to earth hanging to the chute lines. He is interested now in exchanging parachutes with his partner—in mid-air.

At Roosevelt Field on Long Island Joe Crane inspects parachute apparatus. This must be done by licensed inspectors every three months by order of the United States Government. There can be a flaw only once. In a game as thrilling, as breath-taking and daring as bailing out, Joe Crane is cautious, scientific and careful. He wants his tomorrows.

DIDIER MASSON, of Belize, B. H., has a question to ask—what about Major Raoul Lufberry as a World War hero?

I would like to ask Major Harmel the reasons why Major RAOUL LUFBERRY was omitted in his list of World War heroes? It is hardly possible to believe that he never heard of such a wonderful character as Lufberry. Lufberry, before the U. S. went to the war, had already a dozen Boches to his credit while a member of the Lafayette Squadron. He was transferred to the U. S. Aviation and was promoted to major. The last time I saw him was at Issoudun, where he came to choose his pilots for his own Squadron. I was then myself French instructor in the Issoudun School of Aviation. Later on, at the front, near Toul, his plane was shot, took fire and Luf jumped out of the plane.

Yours sincerely,

—DIDIER MASSON

EUGENE Dormint, of Makanda, Illinois, asked a while back about a canoe trip in the Everglades. Hapsburg Liebe wrote a good long reply, and we printed it in *Ask Adventure*. Paul L. McGinty, Box 345, Boynton, Florida, sends an open letter to Comrade Dormint. In some ways he differs with Hapsburg Liebe. That reminds me—

Tracy Richardson, well known soldier of fortune and explorer, was in the other day, talking about Central America. Let two men take the same trail, but start at opposite ends, and they'll see the country differently—bound to, he said.

As for snakes in Florida: once a real estate man took me some miles out of Miami to an undeveloped tract. We walked around. He looked puzzled. "Damn it," he said, "not a rattlesnake!" "Why damn it?" I asked. He grinned. "You're a reporter, and you haven't got a dime, and couldn't buy any real estate. But whenever I start walking a real prospect around here the whole place begins to buzz!"

Mr. Liebe and Mr. McGinty both know the country well, so they're entitled to disagree a bit. The letter is interesting enough to print entire.

In the first place you should know that the 'Glades have been drained for many years now by an intricate system of canals. The result is that in the winter season the 'Glades are so dry that countless fires mysteriously spring up and the soil burns like peat down to the limestone rock. If you don't believe this just ask any Miamian if he can't smell smoke any time the wind is from the west during the winter season! When the 'Glades are dry you might go on foot for days and hardly ever find water deep enough to float even a light canoe. As for the snakes which are supposed to be so plentiful, you will never see them. I've made scores of trips in the 'Glades and snakes are seldom seen, likewise wild game, although it is a very wild and desolate region.

Now, if you are the adventurous sort and really would like to see some of the real wild virgin Florida country from a canoe, why not make the trip into the Ten Thousand Island country, which extends from south of Naples down almost to Cape Sable on the southwest coast of the state? My brother and I made the trip last March in an ordinary canvas canoe with a light outboard motor and had a glorious time of it. We started out from the town of Everglades and made most of the way to Cape Sable without going into the Gulf of Mexico, at least as far as the mouth of the Chatham River. From here we made our way down the Gulf to the three Cape Sables. This whole region is a maze of mangrove islands (ten thousand is no exaggeration) and the Rivers Shark, Harney's, Roger's, Lossman's, etc., may be followed away up into the 'Glade country if one is so inclined.

You'll go weeks in this back country and never see a living soul so you'd be strictly on your own. We bought large government navigation charts of this region (seventy-five cents each) and found that we could tell just where we were by these charts. Would suggest that you mark with pencil your trail as you go along, or the maze of islands will so confuse you that you will become hopelessly lost, although with a compass one should eventually be able to work his way out into the gulf again. By all means have all the charts of the entire region you will visit and *under no circumstances* go any place off the chart or you are sure to run into trouble.

If you make the trip get in touch with me, and perhaps you would be so kind as to keep your eyes open for certain specimens of natural history in which I am interested.

I would advise you to carry enough food and water to more than last the time you figure to stay "out." You will find it very hard to live off the land and fishing from the canoe might be bad should a big one take your lure in a hurry and turn you over, for shark and large tarpon are thick in this country and it would be disastrous to attempt snaring one with a loaded canoe! We took all our food in the canoe to last a month and would advise the same for you.

Water is the most vital item, for you can get no fresh water unless you go way up the rivers where they are no longer salt. We took our water and gas mixture for the motor in square 5 gal. tins, bought at a wholesale paint shop and well painted to allay rust. We took twenty gallons of water and about ten gallons of the gas mixture and had a little to spare after a bit over three weeks. We slept on a ground cloth, waterproof, and in an army pup tent with a standard army pup tent mosquito bar (bought from Army store). Be sure you have the mosquito bar, you'll need it plenty, although the bugs won't bother you much while you are in the boat during the day time if you go in during the dry season. Don't consider any other time!

Places to camp will be a serious problem. One can't camp on the mangrove islands for at high tide the roots of the trees are in the water. Study the charts and you will notice "shell-mounds" mentioned. These are great piles of cast off shells made by some prehistoric peoples of this region and afford about the only high and dry land near the coast. We figured to make one of these mounds to camp on each night, so better study your charts and learn to read a compass and chart thoroughly. Sleeping in a loaded canoe would be cramped, to say the least.

People will tell you that it is suicide to try the trip without a guide, but all I can say is that we made it with no trouble and went up almost all of the rivers in this region. Don't be surprised if a panther or two prowls around your camp at night. You will be amazed by the multitude of tracks about the camp the next morning! On the way back from Cape Sable we went the whole way back through the Gulf of Mexico but this is risky business unless you know the weather pretty well, because should it chop up a bit suddenly there isn't always a handy place to land. If you really know a canoe it can be made if you are lucky, though. You will be amazed at how much can be stowed away in an ordinary canoe, but better spend plenty of time before you start and figure out only the things that will be essential.

Mr. Liebe speaks of following the Miami canal through the 'Glades. These canals are so choked up with water-hyacinth plants that going would be almost impossible for stretches of a mile or so at a time, or more. The main thing is *plan* the thing well before you start. *Take no chances,* for you can count on absolutely no help. Snakes are a menace, but they won't bother you in the boat and when you go ashore you should have no trouble if you watch carefully where you step. (Didn't see a single snake all the time we were on our trip, although Cape Sable is reputed to be a rattlesnake haven). Another thing is to have warm clothing and plenty of blankets, for it can get plenty chilly in the winter season, although most of the time you would probably be comfortable with little or no clothing.

If you are really interested in this country I would suggest that you secure a copy from your library of Dimock's "Florida Enchantments." It shows many splendid photographs of this very country and is a most interesting thing to read. Other fine books on southern Florida are the works of Dr. C. T. Simpson, "Lower Florida Wilds" and also "Out of Doors in Florida."

WE got into a few newspapers recently, with a resultant lot of inquiries from friends. We were Harry Steeger, president of this company, Seymour G. Pond and Robert S. Benjamin, *Ask Adventure* experts, and myself. It seems that we got shipwrecked on Plymouth Rock. You can judge about that for yourself.

We were making a trip to Gloucester in Steeger's 48-foot schooner (a Lunenberg boat, built for the Grand Banks, husky and short-rigged). We arrived at Plymouth at dusk after twenty-four hours of sailing from New London. We had been bucking steep little head seas that shot cold spray the length of the boat, and we were cold and wet. The wind had been rising steadily. We anchored in Plymouth harbor, wishing we had room about us to pay out more scope because whitecaps were rolling there and we thought we might drag during the night. As we were preparing to put out another anchor, a friend came out from the yacht club in a motorboat.

"Better get on one of the courtesy moorings!" he yelled. "They'll hold anything."

We hauled the anchor short, let the boat drag slowly until we reached a courtesy mooring astern, fastened to that securely, took our own anchor up in order not to foul the mooring. Then we went ashore to eat.

We ate well, because it had been too rough to keep a pan on the stove. We decided to sleep well also, because the night before we had taken one-hour tricks at the wheel in a cold rain, and nobody had slept much. We turned in at a hotel.

Next morning the boat lay high and dry on her side directly in front of Plymouth Rock. The buoy lay there with the schooner, still fastened securely to the bitt but not fastened to anything else but a few feet of heavy but broken old rope. The schooner's bowsprit was pointed directly at the Rock, fifteen feet away.

If you know that beautiful little town you recall that Plymouth Rock stands right at high tide mark on a sand beach about fifty feet wide, flanked on either side by long stone seawalls. Had the schooner drifted thirty feet either side of the blind course she took, she would have been beaten to pieces. But she was completely undamaged, and came off on the next high tide by the good old trick of attaching a kedge to a halyard and holding her mainmast down until the keel floated clear.

"Hurled through a granite breakwater in a gale," said one newspaper. And the most conservative morning paper in New York headed a paragraph or two: Four Saved in Yacht Wreck.

H. B.

Ask Adventure

Information you can't get elsewhere

LEARN Swahili from text books published in London.

Request:—How can I learn Swahili? Are there any books published in the United States on that African language?

—Louis Kajdi, Chicago, Ill.

Reply by Mr. Gordon Mac Creagh:—I know of no place in the United States where you can gain *instruction* in Swahili.

You can, however, buy books; and if you have any linguistic ability, can teach yourself, with a fair approximation of pronunciation —as I know one young American to have done.

"A First Swahili Handbook" by A & M Werner. The Sheldon Press, Northumberland Ave. W.C.2 London, England. Price: Three shillings & six pence.

"A Handbook of the Swahili Language" by Edward Steere. Published by "The Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge." London, England. Price: Two shillings & six pence.

There is no book on Swahili published in America.

THE alphabetical complex hit the airplane's tail long ago.

Request:—In "Low Jump" by Lloyd S. Graham, which appeared in *Adventure*, the following expression is used in reference to a seaplane: HS2L seaplane.

Will you please tell me the significance of the expression? Will you give me the key to the marking of planes?

—Laura B. Everett, Berkeley, Calif.

Reply by Major Falk Harmel:—I have your letter making inquiry concerning the HS2L. I am afraid I cannot give you anything definite as to the significance of the designation of this aircraft. The HS2L is a later development of the Curtiss HS-1, brought out in the year 1917, and purchased by the Navy Department. The HS-1 was a flying boat having a length of thirty-eight feet and a wing span of sixty-two feet. Its gross weight was close to six thousand pounds, its speed about eighty-seven miles an hour, and it was powered with a Liberty engine. This plane was remodeled, incorporating a larger rudder, and its designation was thereupon changed to HS-2L.

It is my understanding that the model designation was one employed by the Curtiss Company so as to differentiate between the different types of airplanes they manufactured. The model designation in those days had no military significance as do the model designations of the present time. For instance, referring to airplanes at present used by the Army Air Corps, you will see such army plane designations as P, O, PT, B, C, A, BT, LRA. After the initial letter, you will also note a numeral, and after the numeral another letter. "P" stands for Pursuit, "O" for Observation, "PT" for Primary Training, "B" for Bombardment, "C" for Cargo, "A" for Attack,

"BT" for Basic Training" and "LRA" for Long Range Amphibian. The numeral following the first letter denotes a different model of plane. For example, a P-1 (Pursuit) plane may be powered by a Curtiss engine, while a P-2 (Pursuit) plane may use an engine of different manufacture. A P-6 may be a single-seater Pursuit plane, while a P-16 may be a two-seater job. If you note an additional letter following the numeral, such as P-1A, it means that the airplane is identical to the P-1, same engine, save that the engine is equipped with a supercharger to give the plane better performance at high altitude.

With regard to Navy airplanes, you may, perhaps, have noted such model designations as VB, VF, VH, VJ, VN, VO, VP, VR, VS and VT. You may have also noted designations with Z as the first letter. The letter "V" signifies heavier-than-air craft and "Z" lighter-than-air craft. The letter "B" means Bomber, "F" Fighter, "H" Ambulance, "J" general utility, "N" Training, "O" Observation, "P" Patrol, "R" Transport, "S" Scouting and "T" Torpedo.

INTERMARRIAGE among the bears.

Request:—To settle an argument of long standing—is a cinnamon bear a distinct breed or a sport?

—Noel M. Mac Farlane, Wingdam, B. C.

Reply by Mr. Ernest W. Shaw:—Authorities agree pretty well that there is no breed of pure cinnamon or brown bear. I am convinced of this. In Colorado, Montana, Wyoming and British Columbia, I have seen a mother black bear with both a brown and a black cub at sucking age. However, I am free to admit that I have never happened to see a brown female with both a black and brown cub at side. I have seen many times female blacks in Maine and Eastern Canada, and have yet to see my first one with a brown cub. In fact I have never seen or heard of any but pure black bear in any of the Eastern United States and Canada. I am inclined to think that the mixture of brown and black comes from former crosses between black and grizzly. I know perfectly well the fear blacks have for a grizzly, yet also I know the fear most dogs have for a wolf, yet when a bitch dog is in heat she will mate with a dog wolf. It is possible that the same proves true between the black and grizzly, perhaps not often but enough so that the black offspring sometimes produces a brown cub. I know that the grizzly and black run sufficiently near to make a mating possible. Also there is no physical difference in make up or anatomy to make it impossible. I incline strongly to the grizzly-cross idea, and that subsequent matings between such a cross with a pure black will produce a brown even through several generations of black breeding. The numbers of brown bear seen and killed would indicate that such a black-grizzly cross is rather frequent.

AND the inquirer didn't mention sloop, ketch, razee, ship of the line, trireme, galleass, cruiser, brig—and, maybe, canoe, billander and xebec!

Request:—What are the following ships? How are they told one from another? What is the tonnage, square yards of sail and knots per hour of each?

Frigate, galleon, brigantine, barquentine, bark, schooner, yacht, man-of-war, and destroyer.

—Joe Wheeler, Jamestown, Tenn.

Reply by Mr. Charles Hall:—That is quite a comprehensive question of yours, and one that cannot be answered completely. The size of a vessel varied from century to century.

The frigate was a medium sized sailing man-of-war. At first she was small, a vessel that could be rowed. By 1830 she was a sizable craft. The frigates of 1812 were about one hundred and sixty feet long and could sail perhaps twelve to thirteen knots at best. The frigate carried her guns mainly on one covered deck, with guns also on poop and forecastle.

The galleon was a fifteenth century craft of considerable size, high-sided and with high poop and forecastle. I doubt if she could sail faster than eight knots.

A brigantine is a two-master with square sails on the foremast, a boom mainsail and a square topsail and topgallant sail on the main.

A barquentine is a three-master with yards on the fore and fore and aft sails on main and mizzen.

A bark is also a three-master, with yards on fore and main and fore and aft sails on the mizzen.

A schooner is fore and aft rigged nowadays on all masts of which she has from two to six. There are topsail schooners with a square topsail on the fore.

A yacht may be of any rig and size. She is a pleasure vessel. A man-of-war—a war vessel of any size and rig.

A destroyer is a fast vessel of the Navy with light guns and a number of torpedo tubes for launching torpedoes.

NO SPECIALIST—but here's a man who has turned out some winners.

Request:—I am training a few boys, whose ages range from seventeen to twenty years, to become amateur boxers. One boy, rather better than the average, has already won twelve amateur fights for me and had three reverses, each of which had to go an extra round before he lost the decisions.

Now I am not sure that I am giving them the right routine of training. Here is our schedule: Two rounds, skip rope; two, light bag; two, shadow box; and two, boxing. Eight rounds in all, each three minutes, with one minute rest in between, and my favorite method is to teach them a fast left jab followed by a right cross. They all possess long reaches (all featherweights). Could you give me a better routine? Although I was in the fight game in the British Army for a few years, I realize I'm no specialist as a scientific boxer, so any information or advice you can give me, I'll surely be glad to apply to my boys.

—EDWARD THOMAS, Nanticoke, Pa.

Reply by Captain Jean V. Grombach:—I would suggest the following changes and additions to your routine.

Let all the boys get limbered up by one round of skipping rope at beginning of your actual eight round timed workout and replace the two rounds skipping rope with two rounds against the heavy bag. This bag can be cloth or leather filled with felt and sand and hung so that the bottom is level with the boxer's waist. Then after that work out, have them do three minutes of body work to develop stomach muscles.

Use of the left hand is of most importance and a man with a good left jab, good legs and a good head can always go far. However, I would try to also have them develop a left hook.

Have you the booklet "Boxing," price $.50, published by A. G. Spalding & Co., 105 Nassau Street, New York City? It is a grand book on the sport. Hope this will help you.

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SCIENTIFIC AND TECHNICAL SUBJECTS

Anthropology: *American; north of the Panama Canal; customs, dress, architecture, pottery and decorative arts, weapons and implements, fetishism, social divisions*—ARTHUR WOODWARD, Los Angeles Museum, Exposition Park, Los Angeles, Calif.

Automobiles and Aircraft Engines: *design, operation and maintenance*—EDMUND B. NEIL, care of *Adventure*.

Aviation: *airplanes, airships, airways and landing fields, contests, aero clubs, insurance, laws, licenses, operating data, schools, foreign activities, publications, parachute gliders*—MAJOR FALK HARMEL, 709 Longfellow St., Washington, D. C.

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Taxidermy—SETH BULLOCK, care of *Adventure*.

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Army Matters: *United States and Foreign*—CAPT. GLEN R. TOWNSEND, 5511 Cabanna Ave., St. Louis, Mo.

Federal Investigation Activities: *Secret Service, etc.*—FRANCIS H. BENT, 251 Third St, Fair Haven, N. J.

Navy Matters: *United States and Foreign*—LT. COMDR. VERNON C. BIXBY, U. S. N. (retired), P. O. Box 588, Orlando, Fla.

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U. S. Coast Guard—COMDR. VERNON C. BIXBY, U.S.N. (ret.), P. O. Box 588, Orlando, Florida.

U. S. Marine Corps and Civilian Conservation Corps—CAPT. F. W. HOPKINS, R. F. D. 1, Box 614, La Canada, Calif.

World War: *strategy, tactics, leaders, armies, participants, historical and political background*—BEDA VON BERCHEM, care of *Adventure*.

GEOGRAPHICAL SUBJECTS

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Philippine Islands—BUCK CONNER, Quartzsite, Ariz., care Conner Field.

★**New Guinea**—L. P. B. ARMIT, Port Moresby, Territory Papua, via Sydney, Australia.

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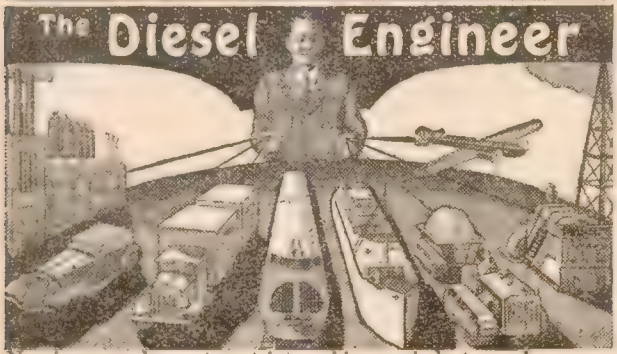
The Diesel Engineer



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Just as the gasoline engine changed the jobs of thousands who depended on horse-drawn vehicles for their living—so now the Diesel engine is fast invading both the power and transportation fields, and threatening the present jobs of thousands of workers.

What This New Field Offers You

Diesel engines are fast replacing steam and gasoline engines in power plants, motor trucks and busses, locomotives and ships, aircraft, tractors, dredges, pumps, etc. —opening up an increasing number of well-paid jobs for Diesel-trained men. You will get full information about the latest Diesel developments—two- and four-stroke cycles; low- and high-speed and heavy duty types; Diesel-electric generating systems, etc.—in our course. Includes all text material—with special diagrams for quick understanding of this new power.

Get our Free Diesel Booklet and find out what the Diesel field offers you—how quickly you can obtain a complete understanding of Diesel engine principles and operation by spare-time study at home. Asking for information involves no obligation—but it may mark the turning point in your life. Write TODAY for full information.

Now is your chance to get into a big new industry and grow up with it to an important position. Today there is practically no competition in the Diesel field, but the increasing use of Diesel engines will result in keen competition for jobs after a few years. If you start your training now and get established in this field, you need not worry about competition.

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29x4.50-20	2.00	.85
30x4.50-21	2.10	.85
28x4.75-19	2.15	.95
29x4.75-20	2.20	.95
29x5.00-19	2.55	1.05
30x5.00-20	2.55	1.05
5.25-17	2.60	1.15
28x5.25-18	2.60	1.15
29x5.25-19	2.60	1.15
30x5.25-20	2.60	1.15
31x5.25-21	2.90	1.15
5.50-17	2.95	1.15
28x5.50-18	2.95	1.15
29x5.50-19	2.95	1.15
6.00-17	3.10	1.15
30x6.00-18	3.10	1.15
31x6.00-19	3.10	1.15
32x6.00-20	3.10	1.25
33x6.00-21	3.25	1.25
32x6.50-20	3.35	1.35
6.00-16	3.65	1.45

REGULAR CORD TIRES

Size Tires	Tubes	Size Tires	Tubes
30x3½	$1.85	$0.75	32x4½ $3.10 $1.15
31x4	2.65	.85	34x4½ 3.10 1.15
32x4	2.65	.85	30x5 3.30 1.35
33x4	2.65	.85	33x5 3.40 1.45
34x4	2.90	.85	35x5 3.55 1.55
32x4½	3.00	1.15	

HEAVY DUTY TRUCK TIRES
(High Pressure)

Size Tires	Tubes	Size Tires	Tubes
30x5	$3.70	$1.95	34x7 $9.95 $3.35
33x5	3.75	1.45	38x7 9.95 3.95
34x5	3.95	2.00	36x8 10.65 3.95
32x6	7.25	2.75	40x8 12.65 4.15
36x6	9.00	3.95	

TRUCK BALLOON TIRES

Size Tires	Tubes	Size Tires	Tubes
6.00-20	$3.25	$1.65	7.50-20 $5.40 3.75
6.50-20	3.60	1.95	8.25-20 7.60 $4.95
7.00-20	4.85	2.95	9.00-20 9.40 5.85
			9.75-20 12.95 6.45

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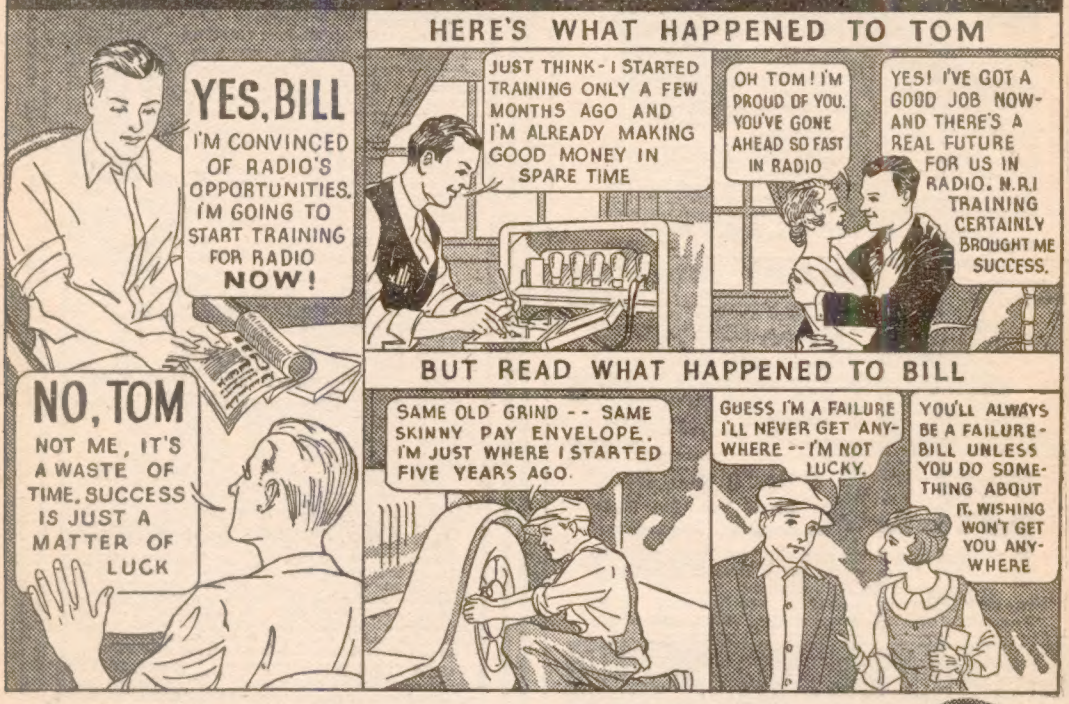
BOTH HAD THE SAME CHANCE - *BUT*

READ WHY ONLY TOM MADE GOOD


YES, BILL
I'M CONVINCED OF RADIO'S OPPORTUNITIES. I'M GOING TO START TRAINING FOR RADIO NOW!
NO, TOM
NOT ME, IT'S A WASTE OF TIME. SUCCESS IS JUST A MATTER OF LUCK
HERE'S WHAT HAPPENED TO TOM
JUST THINK - I STARTED TRAINING ONLY A FEW MONTHS AGO AND I'M ALREADY MAKING GOOD MONEY IN SPARE TIME
OH TOM! I'M PROUD OF YOU. YOU'VE GONE AHEAD SO FAST IN RADIO
YES! I'VE GOT A GOOD JOB NOW - AND THERE'S A REAL FUTURE FOR US IN RADIO. N.R.I TRAINING CERTAINLY BROUGHT ME SUCCESS.
BUT READ WHAT HAPPENED TO BILL
SAME OLD GRIND -- SAME SKINNY PAY ENVELOPE. I'M JUST WHERE I STARTED FIVE YEARS AGO.
GUESS I'M A FAILURE I'LL NEVER GET ANYWHERE -- I'M NOT LUCKY.
YOU'LL ALWAYS BE A FAILURE - BILL UNLESS YOU DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT. WISHING WON'T GET YOU ANYWHERE

I will train you at home

IN YOUR SPARE TIME FOR A GOOD RADIO JOB

J. E. SMITH, President
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Many Radio Experts Make $30, $50, $75 a Week

Why struggle along in a dull, low-pay job? Start training now for the live-wire Radio field. Hundreds of successful men now in Radio got their start through N. R. I. Training.

Davis J. Shumaker, R. 2, Box 105F, Vicksburg, Miss. wrote: "I am manager of Radio Service Department of one of Mississippi's largest furniture stores." Frank Reese, 232 S. 60th St., Philadelphia, Pa., wrote: "I have my own Radio business which shows $300 a month profit."

Many Make $5, $10, $15 A Week in Spare Time While Learning

Hold your job. I'll not only train you in a few hours of your spare time a week, but the day you enroll I start sending you Extra Money Job Sheets which quickly show you how to do Radio repair jobs common in your neighborhood. I also give you radio equipment for conducting experiments and making tests that teach you to build and service practically every type of receiving set made.

Otis Denton, 14105 Lorain Ave., Cleveland, Ohio wrote: "I picked up $1,800 while studying." Gordon Angwin, 1815 Barrett Ave., Richmond, Calif. wrote: "I average $400 to $500 profit a year in spare time."

Mail the coupon now. Get the facts about Radio—the field with a future. N.R.I. Training fits you for jobs in connection with the manufacture, sale, operation and repair of Radio, Loud Speaker and Television apparatus. It fits you to go in business for yourself, service sets, operate on Board Ships, in Broadcasting, Television, Aviation, Police Radio and in many other jobs. My FREE book tells how to learn quickly at home in spare time to be a Radio Expert. My book has shown hundreds of men and young men how to make more money and win success. It's FREE to any ambitious person over 15 years of age. Investigate. Read how Radio has grown in a few years to a giant industry. Read about developments. Find out what Radio offers you—what my men are doing and earning—about my Money Back Agreement, and the many other N. R. I. features. Mail the coupon in an envelope, or paste it on a 1c postcard TODAY.

MAIL THIS NOW

J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 6AWI,
National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

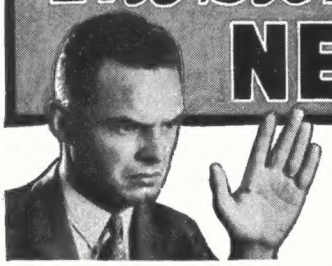
Dear Mr. Smith: Without obligating me, send your book which points out the spare time and full time job opportunities in Radio and your 50-50 method of training men at home in spare time to become Radio Experts. (Please write plainly)

Name ..... Age.....

Address .....

City ..... State.....

The Story of 2 MEN who NEEDED CASH



THIS MAN DOUBTED:

He said: "Yes, I am broke. I am really terribly hard up. I haven't a cent of extra money for anything. I wish I knew where to get some. I haven't a bit of faith in anything. I am a failure and my luck is terrible."

DO YOU need money to pay the rent—to meet nagging bills—or to clothe and feed the family? Are you hard up for ready cash and obliged to deny yourself many comforts or even necessities? Are you working for such small wages that you can't make ends meet? Then you will be interested in the experiences of these two men.

THIS MAN ACTED:

He said: "Yes, I need money. I am tired of penny pinching. Your generous offer sounds good to me. It costs nothing to investigate—I have everything to gain. I am going to send my name and find out just what you have to offer me."

RUN A LOCAL COFFEE AGENCY

Wonderful Opportunity to make $60.00 in a week

I'll help you start at once and back you up to the limit. Here's a bona fide cash-getting idea you may never have heard of before—a unique and utterly different way of getting the cash you need. With my plans I have "saved the day" for hundreds who were at their wits' end. Not just another clock punching job . . . no back-breaking labor. Even spare time nets up to $5.00 in a day . . . full time up to $60.00 in a week. Good opportunities open. You don't require any previous experience and you don't risk any of your own money. Think of being prosperous again. Just send me your name for free facts.

A FEW WEEKS LATER

Now look at these two men as they meet on the street. One is a success and the other is a failure. One had the courage to try; the other had no faith—he was a doubter—he is still in hard luck. The man in the car is a success because he was willing to listen to reason. He was not afraid to send in his name and get the facts. When he saw my public announcement stating I would give a brand new Ford Tudor Sedan to producers as a bonus in addition to cash earnings, he believed in my sincerity. Why don't you, too, investigate?

Have Big Weekly Cash Earnings

If you are tired of slaving for small pay, here's your chance to break away and make big money. You can even start in your spare time—see the business grow—have cash in your pocket—be independent. Think of the joy of being a successful business person in your own locality with big, year 'round earnings of your own. You don't have the usual money risks of a business man. There is no limit to your possibilities. Earnings begin at once, the very first day.

LOOK AT THESE UNUSUAL EARNINGS

I have a flood of glowing letters from prosperous, successful men and women telling of unusual earnings they have made with my plans. L. P. Boyne, La., made $67.20 in a week. Mrs. H. H. Hosick, Nebr., made $41.75 the first week. Steve Witt, Mo., made $21.59 in a day. Paul T. Krider, Pa., $81.00 in a week. Albert Becker, Mich., $100.00 in a week. George W. Creed, Ohio, $95.00 in a week. Exceptional earnings like these are positive proof of the amazing earning possibilities of my offer.

STARTED PENNILESS

6½ Months Later Was Worth $1,200

"Only six and a half months ago I started with your company without a penny to my name, and today (I just finished my balance) I am worth a little more than $1,200.00. I can hardly believe it myself—such a success in so short a time! But it's the truth. Many a day I made from $15.00 to $20.00 clear profit. Your Happy Hustler, Hans Coordes, Nebr.

NEW FORDS Given as a Bonus

SEND NO MONEY—SEND NAME

I send everything you need. You positively don't risk a penny of your money. There is nothing complicated or puzzling about my money-making methods. You will be the judge and decide for yourself if the earning possibilities are satisfactory. Just give me a chance to explain the facts. It costs you nothing to find out. Send name on coupon or penny postcard.

DO IT NOW!

TEAR OUT—MAIL NOW

Albert Mills, President
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Rush me free facts. Tell me how I can start at once and make up to $60.00 in a week with a permanent Coffee Agency of my own. Also send me your Ford Automobile offer. This will not obligate me.

Name .....

Address .....

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(Please Print or Write Plainly)

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